

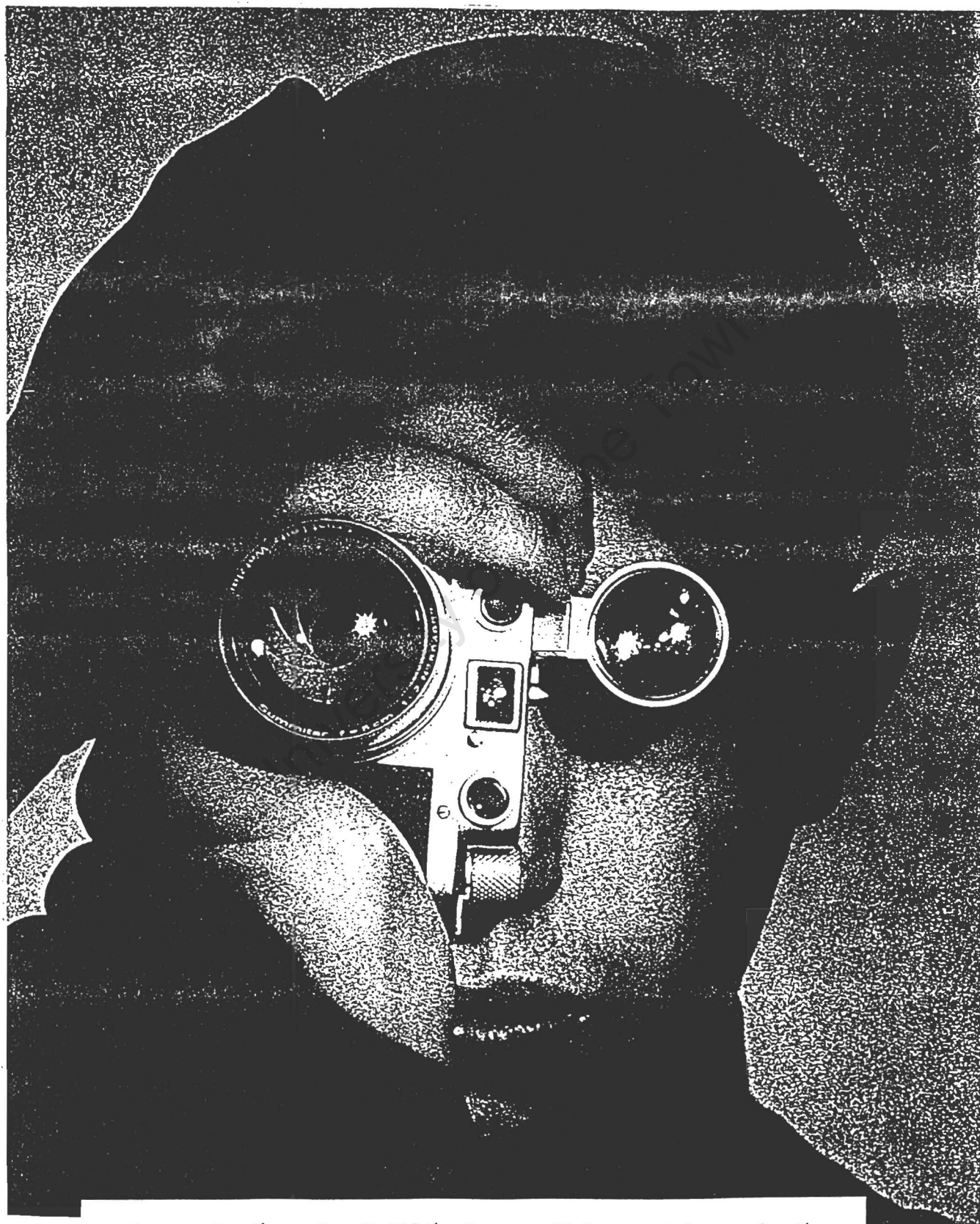
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The Hobbyist

and other stories

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Amichai Nikita Kapilevich

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Preface: Faces and Places

"But someone watches over us when we write: Mother. Teacher. Shakespeare. God."

- Martin Amis, London Fields

1

I suppose the best thing about this preface is that it allows me to take the initiative and deconstruct myself; done honestly enough it should be therapeutic. But let me not inflict any autobiographical apologies yet (I'm neither famous nor honest enough), for whereas mystery is not something you can accuse an aspiring writer of affecting, arrogance is. Later, depending on his or her success, this principle is inverted.

My name is Amichai Nikita Kapilevich. I am 23 years old. I dig on Martin Amis. Let that suffice.

2

This anthology of short stories was written over a two year period (1997-1998) towards the purpose of completing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town. My supervisor was Professor JM Coetzee. The general pattern was that I would ekè forth a story and present it to him whereafter we would meet, discuss it, and he would hand it back to me with notes and corrections. Professor Coetzee is a wise, venerable and astonishingly humble man and it was an honour to have dried my wings under his auspices. I have always been intimidated by authority (a back-lash from my rebellious adolescence, an augmented reformation of sorts), and with retrospect I can surmise that I wasn't the best candidate for artistic guidance under these circumstances. On the other hand, my tendency for verbosity and euphuism - my hot blood - was counter-balanced by the Professor's terse genius perfectly and very necessarily. It is one of the most difficult things in the world to be told that what you are writing is off-par; it must be pretty tough telling it like it is to a delinquent Turk, too. It is therefore with humble pride that I acknowledge Professor Coetzee's infinite patience through the doldrums of my blocks and the manic paroxysms of my creativity. I dedicate this anthology to him.

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Quick anecdote: I read a lot and I am very impressionable, easily influenced to the point of inadvertent parody, and a large part of this whole exercise was for me to develop my own style. ("It's not the words, it's the rhythm of thought," wrote Martin Amis.) It is for these reasons - at least, lest he discover them - that I consciously and specially avoided the work of my supervisor. I had only read The Master of St. Petersburg and intended to keep it that way for my own good. But when I discovered that I would be tutoring Waiting for the Barbarians, I knew that this would have to change. I began to delve. Imagine my chagrin at reading the first page of Dusklands. It stuck in my craw: I've been choking on my 'principles' ever since.

The stories do not appear in chronological order in the anthology, but - for my own sake of continuity - in this preface I shall deal with them as they came to me.

The first two stories I wrote have been discarded. The first was a scatological Tarantinoesque tale about a jealous drug addict who kills his best friend and drives to Johannesburg in a narcotic fugue with the body in his boot. Somewhere along the line the body goes missing and he is left to suffer the slings and arrows of impending moral responsibility for his actions. It was a poor effort, really, and apart from a few descriptive passages of Johannesburg, quite purposeless. I tried to re-write it in the third person, I chopped it up and changed the ending thrice, but to no avail. By the third or fourth time I'd brought the increasingly mauled script to Professor Coetzee, he was forced to gently do his job. "I'll be honest with you," sighed Professor Coetzee, "I don't like it." No matter, I told myself, I'll turn it into a movie-script and mail it to Hollywood.

I started on the next story immediately, which was almost as bad: a girl whose car breaks down in Citrusdal finds herself the inheritor of a senile woman's mountain lodge. Staying there, renovating, she meets the deceased woman's prodigal son and they fall in love until it is revealed that the son's affection for her is as demented and incestuous as the old woman's was. Another Hindenburg, and by now I was starting to worry about myself by myself. It was already May or June and I hadn't even been off the mark. I remember coming home to Johannesburg with nothing to show for my first few months of work and falling into a clinical depression: I slept and slept. My worried parents tried to staunch this ostensible ennui by buying me a camera and that's when the idea for 'The Hobbyist' arose. I was imagining what I would do with this marvellous instrument *d'art* in Cape Town and these daydreams commingled with my new-found psychosis made it possible for Walter, the protagonist, to be born.

It was around this time that I began to recognise that the short story was a distinguished genre wherein I had neither practice nor education so I read a compendium of T. Corraighesan Boyle's work and discovered that a short story should have an ending like a corkscrew or a hook. I told myself to 'start at the end' and flesh it out from there. When I began to conceive and construct 'The Hobbyist' I knew that I had an end in mind that wasn't exactly a screamer, but it was the closest I'd come to any sort of lingering twist and that, for then, was enough. I brought it to Professor Coetzee like a son to be sacrificed. "It reads well," he told me, and I went home after that meeting intending to phone Penguin with the good news.

The themes of jealousy and obsessive love are explored in 'The Hobbyist' because, for reasons unfathomable to me, I am an obsessive person and a jealous lover. Walter is an anti-hero because all my favourite characters have been: Eucharid the Mute (And The Ass Saw The Angel, Nick Cave); Humbert Humbert (Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov); John Self (Money, Martin Amis)... The numbered divisions in the story are necessary because of the haphazard chronological sequence, which jumps from Walter's deluded ruminations to events that are weeks apart.

I read 'The Hobbyist', quickly and monotonously, at the second UCT English Postgraduate Colloquium. Damon Galgut was there.

Note: "Hate traps us by binding us too tightly to our adversary." - Milan Kundera, Immortality.

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It occurred to me somewhere around this time, somewhat cruelly, that I had nothing of real significance to say. Not that I am a complete or ambivalent ignoramus when it comes to matters political or South African (in fact, I think I will one day write the Great Satire of the South African socio-political situation) but I know that I have neither the insight nor the inclination to do anything quite so important yet. It also occurred to me that I adore satire and consider its marriage with tragedy the highest form of art second only to painting. I was also, at this stage, trimming and honing the final drafts of 'The Hobbyist' and hating every minute of it; each adjective I erased was, I felt, a healthy tooth extracted. So I decided to purge this disdain by writing an irrelevant literary satire wherein the use of highfalutin language would be justifiable. Consequently, my next work was not so much a short story as it became a psychological project.

I did five years of Latin at school, part of which was mythology. I was not a jock, but attending a monastic Milner High School meant compulsory support for both these popular boys' rugby and their sentiments towards the classics, and so it was that I matriculated full of vicarious scorn for Odysseus' adventures. Now that I am just a little bit saner, I remember how much I secretly enjoyed being read Homer's The Odyssey and that my most heartfelt reservation had to do with the fact that Odysseus actually *fled* Ogygia - a paradise - by his own free will. This was, I decided, a loophole in the plot. When I sat down to write 'Ulysses Godpeck'd: Escape from Ogygia', I intended to vent my semantic frustrations, as well as point out how ludicrous, how Greek, our inherited notion of heroism really is, as well as make the reader smile.

I had a lot of fun with this one, playing with words; *art l'art* and all that. Odysseus, for example, is Arnold Schwarzenegger. Another thing I was trying to explore here was my own imagination. I had grown up with the scenes described in 'Ulysses' and was now - research aside - rendering them, reclaiming them, as hyperbolically as possible.

When I showed this story to Professor Coetzee he shrewdly and immediately judged it to be "primarily a linguistic exercise" which, of course, it was, and that night I went home to give it one of those 'clincher' endings which I knew I was capable of since my success with 'The Hobbyist'. While I was doing my research, I recognised the fact that the human beings - the mortals - in Greek and Roman mythology were mere pawns in some bigger game that happened in the divine realm. Achilles was killed by Athene, who guided the poisoned arrow into his heel, not the archer; in the classic film Clash of the Titans, the realm of the mortals was depicted as a miniature arena wherein the gods and goddesses placed tiny clay figurines: pawns. I wanted to show this and used the notion as an anti-climactic device at the ending to the story.

Note: South African authors are obsessed with 'reclaiming history' which is arguably what I was doing, albeit on a deeply personal level.

Note: Pastiche like a dagger at my throat; parody like the echo of my footsteps from the darkness up ahead. Writing under supervision is like therapy.

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I have always entertained a love-hate relationship with science fiction. It is a didactic genre which plays with concepts and ideals by taking them to their logical extremes. If it's scary now, muses the sci-fi writer, imagine what it will [d]evolve into so many years down the line. The genre warrants a difficult combination of scepticism and idealism which sees its characters using cancer cures in hand-to-hand combat and space-bending teleporters for colonisation. It is the laconic human condition inflicted on an abstract, futuristic canvas.

I have always fostered a keen suspicion towards technology. Nothing good has come of the invention and implementation of, say, the sail (as South Africans we have all lived through its worst repercussions); the Luddites foresaw the modern plague of unemployment; Sting sang: "I never saw no scientific miracle/ that didn't change from a blessing to a curse"; as a child I watched a film called *The Man Who Saw Tomorrow* about Nostradamus and still suffer nightmares from it; I spent my formative years under 'The Button' and MAD (mutually assured destruction), frozen in the Baby Boomer lunacy of the Cold War. In short, I am afraid, and this allows me to don the pessimist's mantle of 'my God, what if...' along with the paranoid's cloak-and-dagger corporate politics, which is what 'Prometheus' Web' is all about.

Machines are, by definition, improved extensions of our selves. 'Prometheus' Web' was written with the intention of exploring what would happen if we eventually learned to build machines that are identical to humans. In the story, however, the humanoid called Jonathan Smith needs to be 'remote-controlled' by Prometheus because I do not think that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will ever equal, much less surpass, the human one in terms of humanity: like the Replicants scenario in Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep, I believe that we humans are too faulty, too quirky. Jonathan Smith is an *extension* of Prometheus, and an improvement, both generic and personal. Nevertheless, there is something profoundly ominous about the prospect of AI penetrating the mundane quiddities of day-to-day activity. This is Prometheus' vision and one which I hope to have condemned in the story.

Having noted these things, let me also confirm that 'Prometheus' is essentially a kitsch, catchy, trashy thriller of a piece. I wished to have the 'reality' of the situation dawn on the reader more slowly than it impacts on the protagonist, Amanda, so I drew out the inevitable rather than revealed the obscure. Technically, the use of different points of view makes this easy. For the record: I didn't realise that I was writing a 'Mad Scientist' cliché until Professor Coetzee pointed this out to me, and by then it was too late.

7

A theme which runs through several of the stories in the anthology is the effect of the desert on the human character. "Character," according to his highness Martin Amis, "is destiny." But for me the setting of each story is a catalyst to each individual character. This is why my urban settings are staggeringly metropolitan and my rural ones bleak and deserted. I have been to Namibia and felt this for myself - *in me* - and have since harboured the desire to be in the desert when it rains. 'The Mayors of Cadiz' is a simple story about rain in the desert. In this story as well as 'Non-Fiction' and 'Willie Meyer's Desert' I explore the fact that some people have a sentimental attachment to harsh surroundings. Driving through the Karoo, I often wonder what it is about such places like these which attracts people and the only possible conclusion is blind sentimentality. I consider the State of Israel - where I was born - to be a classic example of this.

'Cadiz' is written in the style of a fable (the ending, especially, confirms this), but fables are supposed to have morals and in this story there is no clear conscientization or message. Cadiz, like Colesberg in the Free State, was originally just a pit-stop on the way to a gold rush. Once the flow of people through it stops, what keeps the settlers there? Sentimentality? Myopia? Greed?

Hack McGrath is a hero who is trying to escape his heroic and supernatural talent because he feels that he can not control it. Hack is an outcast in his own eyes. In confronting Althea the Rainmaker, he hopes to solve the riddle that is himself but finds that she does not know what it is that sparks her form of telekinesis either. There is no real resolution. Had there been a resolution, it would have been the moral of the story, but in all of the stories except perhaps (for different reasons) 'Rex D. Trueform' and 'Ulysses' I purposefully steer clear of cut-and-dry resolutions because I feel that this gives the stories a more realistic and believable mood. Even in a faerie tale like 'Cadiz', I believe that the lack of resolution makes Hack more believable. Perhaps it is more important for me to create believable characters than whole short stories; faces and places rather than what happens; who and where, not how. Or perhaps I am just learning.

Note: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." - Oliver Wendell Holmes.

One of the remnants of the Old South Africa which I am very aware of is the Angolan War: South Africa's Viet Nam. The brother of a high school friend of mine tried to commit suicide because of the effect of his tour of duty on the rest of his life. This very friend and I missed being conscripted by a matter of months - a close shave. The difference between the two generations, between, say, twenty three year-olds and twenty fives or sixes, is marked: they are older than us by much more than the division of a few years. Every conscripted South African male has many stories to tell and the fact that this war was so clandestine (for political reasons) piqued my retarded sense of responsibility as a South African writer. I'll say it again: South African authors are obsessed with the notion of reclaiming history because ours is a land with so many untold stories. Even I, who consciously avoid the screaming chaos

of our past, could not ignore Angola. 'Willie Meyer's Desert' is the closest I came to achieving a balance between responsible authorship and the trashy thriller I feel I want to one day write.

I did a lot of research on this one, spending a week at the Cape Town Reference Library. There I found as much UN propaganda as contradictory first-hand reports. The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale was, some claim, the largest and most significant military confrontation in Africa since El Alamein, and bourgeois South Africans didn't hear a thing about it due to the gag and blinders imposed on the media by our State of Emergency. Major General Willie Meyer, I read, wanted to take Luanda. And he could have if it weren't for the restraint of his political superiors: Botha held him back. Some say we won the battle of Cuito, others say we were given a distinctly Cuban hiding. I conclude: war is chaos; no-one knows what happened. All we have are thousands of individual war-torn accounts, and only the impossible, absolute sum total of these stories will be the truth. I heard a story wherein a Cuban Mig was accidentally shot down by the South Africans and crashed into the South African forces waiting to attack, demolishing a third of our army. In another, more believable story Cuito was a ludicrous explosion of pent aggression and soldiers fought individually against their own. The horror. Having been weaned on American pop culture, I felt it was my duty to expose the fact that South Africans fought their own Viet Nam, and - like their enemy - they lost. What it was, exactly, that they lost is still not clear to me. Casualties during the decade-long conflict were few and far between, but the lives of those involved had already been sacrificed to circumstances beyond even the control of those in control.

'Willie Meyer's Desert' and 'Non-Fiction' were originally one story titled 'Truth'. In the first draft a journalist is woken late one night to find an armed Angolan veteran sitting on the edge of his bed, determined to tell his story. I divided the story into three parts: the first was the waking of the journalist (who had made a drunken remark at a party that the infuriated vet had over-heard); the second part was written in the second person (the story being told to the journalist where 'you' were the Angolan vet and were about to attack Cuito Cuanavale; the third (unwritten) part was to revert to the scenario in the bedroom wherein the journalist realises that he was wrong to make the remark about Angolan veterans and convinces the vet not to commit suicide. It was terribly post-modern and an obvious failure that I had, by now, learned to recognise half-way through part two.

Tempering my ideas and trying to focus on one or two points that I wished to make, I began to write a story about a party of five people, two older Angolan veterans and three youngsters, who go to the desert on holiday. Again, the desert has a profound effect on each of these people's psyches. The narrator, Paul, is as ignorant about the Angolan War as I was before I began to research it. When one of the veterans, an alcoholic Reccie, comes face to face with a manifestation of his past in the form of a deranged hermit, he goes mad. I regret that most of my research and sentiments have gone to waste because 'Willie Meyer's Desert' digressed to yet another Hollywood pantomime. It is not a bad story but it does not say as much as I had wished. In fact, the more I edited the didactics, the better it looked to me. I decided to shelve my notes and enthusiasm in favour of the next story which I was already writing.

'Rex D. Trueform, the Mystery Man and a Ghost' was, like 'Ulysses Godpeck'd', a release. After my failure with yet another attempt at writing 'relevant' (I still use the word with *avant garde* disdain) literature, I plunged into 'Rex Trueform' with slaving abandon. The story came to me while I was walking through the Company's Gardens in Cape Town (on the way to the Reference Library) with a friend. We were discussing our current affairs and complaining about menial labour. Having read Bukowski and Miller, I was extolling the virtues of manual labour, waitering included, arguing that it was less of a 'soul-suck' than, say, secretarial work. Bukowski seemed to almost enjoy the fact that he was working strictly as a machine and Henry Miller wrote: "I would rather see a man take a gun and kill his neighbor, in order to get the food he needs, than keep up the automatic process by pretending that he has to earn a living." Granted, Miller and Bukowski were lunatics both, but the conversation was a heated one and I found myself sitting in the library wondering whether it would be possible to 'invent' the perfect job for oneself. Rex Daniel (in-the-lion's-den) Trueform, hair slicked back, Hugo Boss-suited, briefcase in manicured hand, was born.

Trueform's prejudice is the result of a cynicism I contracted during my month-long trip to America. I was in Florida and Chicago. The shoe-polisher incident described is one which I personally experienced when my father (who is now an American citizen) was accosted by a fast-talking, burly black man outside a restaurant. The incident had a profound impact on me and I have since regarded Americans to be the most conservative nation in the world. How can I say this without sounding absurdly xenophobic? Most of them really are naïve; yet they are the most affluent nation in the world. This must be dangerous.

Hollywood are the myth-makers of our generation. Quote me, please. An unwitting exponent of this, I used to resent them for it until someone pointed out the fact that whether I deem this cultural colonialism right or wrong doesn't really matter: people - Westerners - love it. It epitomises something ineffable; civilization maybe. But people love heroin too. Anyway, I do feel strongly about the success of this nation, and whereas I don't hate Americans for their blind righteousness as caustically as I used to, I predict and look forward to the turn of this "American Century" like a revolutionary. Paradigms shift, economies tumble; the only stability we can look forward to is the confusion in-between.

Note [to a publisher]: I have a penchant or, dare I call it, style of short story writing wherein my endings become jarringly lyrical. I like to think of it as 'unorthodox'... It seems to work well in 'The Mayors of Cadiz' but reads like a cop-out in some of the others. The shift from the immediate action to the lyrical in 'Rex Trueform' is very noticeable. The story is almost divided along this line. But this is not such a bad thing: the whole mood of the story is supposed to shift suddenly and distinctly from the smooth-talking detail-mongering Rex to the silent, demure Michael Pilger.

After writing 'Rex Trueform', I felt purged enough to tackle some serious stuff again and turned back to the ideas I had stored from 'Willie Meyer's Desert', determined to do them some justice.

During my work on this anthology I have had to feed myself. I suffered under many and diverse jobs which range from auction[eer]ing to painting offices. The most satisfying job I had, though, was as a journalist for SL Magazine. My first article consisted of an irreverent inventory of Andre Brink's and Beezy Bailey's garbage. I have since written five more. In any case, my very-gonzo journalism is, like my fiction, completely insubstantial: apart from one or two clips, my pieces were the paranoid rants, the chunks of hype, of a fringe reporter. But just as it is my dream to write the Great South African Satire, so is it an ambition to sneak into Angola through the Caprivi Strip as a reporter. Into the maw of the hype, as it were; serious stuff, like.

'Non-Fiction', originally titled 'Truth', was the severed Siamese twin of 'Willie Meyer's Desert'. 'Willie Meyer' got the Angolan issues, 'Non-Fiction' got the journalist, one Grant Skimwitz. Skimwitz finds himself on the ball until he discovers that the ball is actually a bubble. When he tries to burst it from beneath him, he realises that it is made of tough stuff. "The medium is the money, if you know what to say," says Skimwitz, "and I told them what they wanted to hear." Again, the story is divided into two parts: in the first Skimwitz discovers how true this statement is and in the second he is taught their draconian implications. In the first part I establish the character, in the second I put this character in the desert and to the test. Skimwitz is sent to the desert by the TRC. His job is minor (I made up a situation where taped testimony is acceptable and he is the appointed courier) but Skimwitz is nevertheless embarrassingly under-qualified. He knows that he is out of his depth.

Sick and tired of the horrible, obvious truth we are being told and not quite sure whether I agree to its justification (there is no such thing as forgive and forget, only forget - I am a Jew so I know what they talk about at the Sabbath dinner table... they haven't forgiven *because* they haven't forgotten), I decided to tackle the controversial issue of the TRC. Attempting to confront stereotypes and cliché, I infused the first part of the story with them, making them a necessary part of the proceedings, then moved the action to a typical rural household to reverse and manipulate the reader's expectations. The end of the story is pessimistic, implying that people - especially the proletariat - need to be ruled and told what to do, that they want things a certain way, because I had at this stage begun to read Sartre and was very taken with his philosophy, especially his psychological theory of *mauvaise foi* [pronounced moh-veh fwa] (bad faith). In his militant Marxist phase (it was only a phase) Sartre claimed that there are two types of people in this world, cowards and swine. The swine make the rules, the cowards obey them. Bad faith is a condition whereby we live according to what other people expect from us. It is more comfortable this way; none of us like the sensation of *angst* because it implies that the world is not what we see it as, and those of us who can escape *angst* do so by enforcing their will on others. Beautifully, profoundly simple and true. A pessimist can claim that, because of the draconian history of this country, South African people have fallen into a massive *mauvaise foi* where black people *want* to be governed by whites because it is easier for them to accept this. This is not a very rainbow attitude, but we are not yet a rainbow nation. The situation as it *is*, is not black-and-white, but an ominous shade of grey, the same grey that the apartheid government wanted us to see and not to see. We all need therapy, Sartre would say, the whole lot of us, to point out the reality of the situation. The reality of the situation, says Sartre, can only be pointed out by a third party: a therapist. Sartre knew.

Note: To be sure, he who practices bad faith is presenting as truth a pleasant untruth or disguising as untruth a displeasing truth.

The fulcrum of Sartre's philosophy is his theory of For-Itself and In-Itself. For-Itself is the ever-changing human consciousness, that spark which makes us what we are; In-Itself is everything else, physical reality, including other human beings. The best way to conceptualise this is by imagining the consciousness as being the frames of a film which our senses constantly fill with images. This is what consciousness is: the sum of our experiences at any given point. Professor Antonio Damasio put it this way:

The self is not a little person inside the brain. It is a perpetually recreated neurobiological state, so continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows it is being remade.

I agree. Sartre tells us that we, as homogenous beings, do not exist unless we are thinking of ourselves as such. Unless we constitute ourselves as an image in our own minds we are merely floating quiddities with infinite potential. Now who said existentialism was a bleak philosophy. Then again, look what this implied freedom and power did for (did *to*) Nietzsche! ("People?" muses Master Amis, "People are chaotic quiddities living in one cave each.") Now, if we take Sartre's views to their logical extreme we can deduce that we do not exist for ourselves as wholly or fully as other people exist for us, which brings us back to the most ludicrous philosophy ever cited, that of Bishop Berkley who said: "To be is to be perceived." Berkley was trying to untangle himself from the sceptic web by saying that even when we do not perceive an object or ourselves, God is perceiving them for us. A silly little dead end philosophy, I thought, until I began to deconstruct the word 'God' and discovered that he was right. (Of all people! Who would've believed? Of all the brilliant minds out there, Bishop Berkley came really close to the truth!) If God is the Jungian global unconscious, Berkley was right. It would take me several pages of esoteric rambling to explain this - and even then you wouldn't believe me so I'll leave it at that. I, myself, still have difficulty accepting this: Berkley was correct. Unbelievable. Christ. Phew. Let's not go there.

Taking two premises to bed with me every night, I tossed and turned: For-Itself *is* In-Itself in its physical manifestation, and 'to be is to be perceived'. I woke up one morning and exclaimed: "Huh?" That is: what is the most perceived thing in the world? Easy: TV. So if TV *is* more than anything is, what would the world look like from the TV's point of view? Enter ON.

'Symbioses' is an existential look at a TV's world from the TV's point of view. I do not hope to solve or teach existential issues in this story. Rather, I use them as a springboard whence I launch several, hopefully funny, diatribes about life from a television's perspective. This modern television set can remember and calculate, but has no idea what he is saying or showing. Happiness, according to Aristotle I think, is a state of everything functioning perfectly. The TV knows what its function is, and this makes him happy, but one thing bothers the TV more than anything else: what is the *meaning* of this function? Why is the TV there? Why are any of us anywhere? This is a question which Sartre has, to my limited knowledge, a limited answer. This is where Sartre and I bifurcate: I am what I call a

spiritual existentialist (ie. An ex-hippy who's read Heidegger). According to my philosophy on life, Sartre knows everything but got one thing wrong (cf. Appendix; a poem called 'Essence'), where "Existence," for him, "precedes essence", there is an emotion (call it God or love or whatever you wish) which precedes existence, so: there is an essence which precedes existence and that essence is the primal, inescapable compulsion to have children. That is what we are here for, what we came from and where we are going: to have children. Everything else is superfluous and unnecessary complication. We've out-grown ourselves (says L. Ron Hubbard). Life's too easy. We are here to procreate - period. A homosexual (many of them my best friends) would not like this view, but to them I would answer that they are the paragons of our species. The species needs less children, not more, and they are born or develop (or whatever) a profound sense of sexual ennui which redeems them from man's fundamental meaning. It's good, not bad. It's deep, man.

So the TV has absolutely no idea what it is that he is actually existing *for* even though he feels an impending, ineffable yet lyrical (aside: lyrical being an attempt at the ineffable) sense of fateful meaning somewhere in his circuitry (his "matrix"). Now, it has long been presaged by computer geeks and paranoids alike that the TV and the Internet will merge and become one system. Children will be able to surf by remote control in 51 cm stereo. It is not a ridiculously far-fetched notion. 'Symbioses' was written about the moment when the TV realises that his meaning in life is to mate with the computer. 'Symbioses' is thus part philosophical treatise, part hype.

Note: Philosophy is the religion of Self; but like deism it is doomed unless it places its most destabilising and mysterious subject at the root of its understanding: emotion. Emotion is not a symptom but a cause of existence. It is not something which can be dictated as much as it dictates.

Note: Home was where the heart was. Then came TV.

'Trilogy' was written in 1997 when I was part of Professor Coetzee's fiction workshop. It is my attempt at metafiction, which I consider to be the highest form of art third only to painting and satire. I wrote a very pretentious dissertation on metafiction in Martin Amis' Money, London Fields and The Information called Amis' Metafiction. My conclusion (or opening paragraph, I can't remember) was that true or 'pure' metafiction is impossible to write because to write about writing fiction, especially the fiction which you are writing [about], is non-fiction. The story is entitled 'Trilogy', which is in turn the title of the novel which the protagonist, Damien Williams, is destined to write because of the events related in the story. The story is actually a collection and collaboration of extracts from four sources: 1) in the future, citizens are required to log onto a network and record their voices or a written entry in an urban census file stored in the government archives. This is not made clear but it is completely unimportant. The reader will probably decide that the excerpts are from some futuristic diary. The point is that this particular citizen has a way with words; 2) Damien's brother Gabriel Williams' published poetry; 3) Damien's father Samuel William's diary; 4) the preface to Damien's subsequent novel Trilogy (which, because of its name and what we know by then, is about his relationship with his father

and brother). The excerpts are compiled by Wanda Williams, Damien's wife, in an attempt at autobiography.

The colloquial yet impassioned nature of the first part of the story is meant to indicate that the voice is spoken and then recorded. Damien is a pinball-playing youth at this stage who has a difficult relationship with his estranged father and junkie brother. Although I have set the story in the future, this is not science fiction. The fact is that Damien and Gabriel are alter-egos and Samuel is a combination of my father, the writer I hope to one day become, and JM Coetzee.

Gabriel, the poet, is an example of what I like to think of as a 'martyr to his art'. That is: he abuses himself in order to write his grim and sartorial verse: it is both a darkly romantic notion and a stereotype to think of the starving poet who just scribbles words that will outlive him in the years to come. In the first few drafts of the story, I included all the poems which now appear in the appendix in Gabriel's section of the story. I like to write poetry and saw this as my opportunity to include them in my fiction. Later, at Professor Coetzee's request, I omitted those poems which do not contribute to the reader's understanding of the family dynamics in the story but put these poems in an appendix.

Samuel Williams is actually the original 'martyr' to his art. He loses everything to it: his family and himself. A disillusioned man, Samuel ends up lonely in a 'compound' where the elderly are kept in the future, damning himself and his art which he sees as the root of his failures; in a way, it is, but the final section of the story implies that Damien does eventually become a writer, and a successful one at that.

Each section is an extract from each of the characters' writings; by making Damien's section a transcription I am implying that in the future writers will not type but dictate and edit their thoughts. From these the reader is expected to piece the message together. 'Trilogy' is my greatest success in terms of 'showing' rather than 'telling', an essential technique which terrifies me with its difficulty.

Note: "One is an artist at the cost of regarding what all non-artists call 'form' as *content*, as 'the thing itself.'" - Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche.

The poems found in the appendix are my occasional verse. My greatest influences in this regard are lyricists Edward Vedder and David Bowie and poets TS Eliot, Robert Graves and some of the Beats.

Note: "Language serves not only to express thought but to make possible thoughts which could not exist without it." - Benjamin Franklin.

"Language is a detriment, an earthbound limitation from which the poet suffers more than anybody else." - Herman Hesse.

I know that many of the thoughts which I have noted in this preface are much grander and more lucid than the stories which are supposed to represent them. On the other hand, it was my priority to entertain rather than illuminate. As I prepare to study abroad, I have already begun to gain some perspective on my place and responsibility as a writer and a South African and I wonder whether retrospect and experience is not something which I have yet to gain by doing so. It is not easy for me to leave, and I know that I am destined to return. These stories are the birth-pangs of a side to me which I am both proud and afraid to consider a Calling. So consider them gently, my dear and gentle ones, for if I have anything to do with it you will see them again and again. Amen.

University of Cape Town

The Hobbyist

1

There he is. Hate - *wham*: and my heart in throat. Gagging, I focus my binoculars as he walks up to her door. Christ, will you look at the smugness on his neanderthal face? I want to leap down there and rip it off his skull with my bare hands. He knocks, combs his fingers through his hair, the fucking gym-boy, the twerp, the tart. Then the door opens and the clap of my heart in my ears stops: sudden, inner silence. She is standing in the doorway. As he leans in to kiss her, as she lifts her lips towards me, I reel at the sight of the soft curve of her neck. Ah for... Get out of the way, you stupid cunt! The image starts to shake as my hands grip the binoculars harder. I consider getting the camera, but it is already too late; they go inside, she behind him. I put the binoculars on the sill. I try to shut my eyes and think of something else, but images of them together, of what they do in there fill my head. My chest constricts. I am shaking.

2

I leave the binoculars on the sill and fetch my camera bag. I attach the 2X teleconverter lens onto the camera, slot the zoom lens on top of it, mount rig onto the tripod, then sit and wait. Now I am ready for when he leaves, which will either be at around three in the afternoon, or after seven. On weekdays, this is usually the case: he arrives at ten or two (or, sometimes, not at all), leaves at three or seven (or not at all). On weekends I can never tell. Weekends are hell. Limbo.

This time the camera is ready. If he comes out at three, for whichever engagement that prides him from the arms of such a Prize, then the sunlight will be perfect and I can usually get some great shots of her. I hope she wears her sarong. It is a maddening veil. Sometimes she walks about the small garden in front of the house after he goes and touches the unkempt flora growing there. She just touches it. She runs her hands through the long grass, tinkers with the lavender, lightly wipes the ivy.

I have taken as many as three reels at a time on a good day. Sequence shots, portraits: my images of her. Of her turning and turning to face me.

3

Her name. I don't even know her name. I know the three faint freckles on her temples and each follicle of down on her cheek, I can count the vertical lines on her lips when she pouts and trace the pillar of her throat in my sleep. I can picture her rummaging about in her purse for change or greeting a supermarket cashier as if these were the carefully rehearsed moves of a play. I am constantly, figuratively and literally, with her, her gliding through crowds with the quasi-choreographed charm of a subtle, peripatetic ballerina in my sleep. I flood myself with her, but I don't even know her name.

Such is the nature of this thrall, I suppose, this state of exquisite torture, her spell on me.

She moved into the house two months ago. I was reading an article about darkroom techniques on the balcony and saw a bakkie park in the street below. It was laden with a couch, a futon, a cabinet, several boxes, and two large pot-plants. On a whim, I got my camera out. I thought I might capture a few interesting images of people carrying heavy objects or trying to fit a couch through a doorway. So it was that I caught my first glimpse of her through the viewfinder of my Minolta XD7. The shutter clicked without me even realising that I had squeezed it. How ironic that that first time I didn't even get a very good look at her; the shutter winked, a blink, and she was gone. Two men in overalls began hauling the stuff in after her. Only having two shots left, I finished the film on them and went back to the article. I thought little of it, but that night, in my darkroom, unwittingly developed my first glimpse of heaven.

The photograph shows her stepping out of the bakkie, her face stretching into a half-smile, one hand on the door, the other out in front of her, fingers splayed. Her face is turned across to the house in anticipation. I stayed up the whole night enlarging the section showing her face, slowly moving in until only her eyes, wide and shining, filled the whole frame. Her eyes. They were the first thing I saw when I woke up the following morning. The print was still in my hand.

Since then I have developed nearly three hundred photographs of her, half of them personally. I have shots of her not only at home but everywhere in the neighbourhood. I follow her everywhere I can. It's usually a matter of hunting her down to a clothing store or a coffee shop, then waiting for the right moment to spin off a dozen or so shots with my winder. I don't push my luck. There have been times when I want to claw my own eyes out in frustration, but I never push my luck. I can never let her know that I am doing this. I can't let her know I'm there.

There are several reasons for this, and they range from the cowardly to the profound. There's *him* (the shitfaced fuckhead, may his teeth fall out), but he is the most insignificant, though irritating, of my deterrents. Far be it from me to insult her by saying that she truly loves the troglodyte, but the possibility exists in the smile he brings out in her. It is a special smile. Nowhere else can I capture that smile, only up here, in my room, overlooking the front door to her house. Only at two o'clock in the afternoon during weekdays can I be sure that she will smile like a little girl for me. For him. For me. Perhaps this is why I hate him so much, because of the way he incarcerates my longing, slaps a routine on my rapture.

Here I am. I am waiting for them to come out.

But the real reason why I don't say anything to her, what prevents me from approaching her most, is not the ape. Neither is it failure! What frightens me to ascetic petrification is the prospect that things will... *change* if I do. Whether she rejects or accepts me, I can not jeopardize my cloak of anonymity. Once I cease to be a stranger in the crowd, the spell will have been broken. However much deeper my love (my *love*) for her may be than the aesthetic appreciation of her image captured in a photograph, these images have become my whole life. I have given everything, sold much, to develop them. Photography is an expensive hobby, though with me it happened to be a professional occupation. I used to freelance, but she has been taking up so much of my time and effort lately that I haven't done a pro shoot in months. No, the photography is not the expensive hobby here: she is. But the material sacrifices are nothing compared to the black-and-blinding rapture she brings me. My room is a shrine to her. I have created a place where she and I can be perfectly together, perfectly together.

No, I don't want to *meet* her yet. Not yet.

I want to indulge my hobby for a while.

I have an hour to kill before three. I light a cigarette and try not to think of her because they are inside together, behind a wall no lens can penetrate. My imagination cleaves through the brick to discover them together like a rabid hound turned on its master, a mad beast dragging the throatless corpse of my self-control by some tangled leash, suffocating with the strain of the pull but driven onward by a fatal compulsion more powerful than death. My own imagination mauling me: when this happens, even when this happens, it's her it's her, *no it's them*: images of *them* entwined, in hazy resolution. Soft focus. Yellow filter. Are they happy right now? Laughing? Is the bastard making her *laugh* as his hand creeps up between her thigh and her panties to touch the soft, bristling down on her sculpted buttocks?

All around me, the hundreds of photographs of her on my wall flutter. The montage of images, some colour, others black-and-white, overlapping, warp and spin as a moan escapes my lips. I can't take this. I'm cracking up.

The sound of my heart is deafening. I try to shake my head clear of it, but that doesn't work. I am about to moan again when I hear a knock on my door and Derrick's muffled voice on the other side:

"Walter? You okay?"

I must breathe. I must breathe.

"Ja," I manage to gasp, "fine!"

I must breathe.

Derrick. The nosy prick. Derrick has seen the photographs on my wall, I know he has. I don't know how exactly or when, seeing as I've learnt to enter and exit my lock-barred room with utmost swiftness, but I know he's seen the photos. One morning, about a week ago, I was in the kitchen making myself a bowl of Coco Pops when he sauntered up to me and said: "So, Walter, what have you been taking pictures of? The girl next door?"

I froze, milk half-out of the fridge. Mary was in the kitchen, too, but seemed not to notice Derrick's bomb. She just carried on eating, the sow. I saw red, pushed at him with the milk carton still in my hand. Milk everywhere. Mary stood up, garbling, chins a-wag.

I said: "Get fucked. Both of you," and walked out.

Nowadays things are tense in the digs. But this is what happens when privacy is compromised. I won't stand for it. Besides, since when is Derrick the concerned digs-mate? All he does is smoke pot and read Nietzsche in the lounge all day anyway. He squats there, in his own little Nirvana of infinite digression, regression, and eternal return, extolling the 'dark genius' to the hapless occasional visitors and hopeless regular quacks who sit huddled around coffee mugs and joints like stoner rodents. Mary ignores him, her friends fawn over him; I despise him. Mary may be an *ugly* behemoth of a wench, but at least she minds her own, Titan business most of the time. Not like Derrick the Yahoo-Philosophy-Major and his Endless Entourage of Geeks. Derrick's a snoopy fuck. The only reason why I moved into digs is that I was desperate after Susan and I broke up. She ran off with some dilettante journalist hack, screeching that I was too possessive. 'Too possessive.' Those were her exact words. Can you fucking believe it? Five years ended by a cliché...

Anyway, here I am. I hate living with these insipid wretches, the pedant and the sow, but would sooner eat glass than move. My room has an incomparable view.

9

I hear Derrick's footsteps disappear in the direction of his room, listen for his door to close, then quickly slip out. There is no one in the lounge. Nick Cave, mellow and gritty, oozes from behind Derrick's door. Mary's room is open and vacant. There is a piece of paper stuck on her door with a symbol drawn on it: a simple design consisting of a triangle, trapezium and a circle arranged to look like some kind of sci-fi ray gun. "It's a muted post-horn," she told me once. "A what?" "A muted post-horn is the symbol of Trystero, an disestablishmentarian organization in a book I read once." Strange one, that Mary. A real goon. Fat, too: eating disorder. You should see her tackle Choc n' Nut Gino Ginelli. Wild, man. I suppose you must have something pathological about you to have read Gravity's Rainbow three times, too. Fucking English students. Crazy.

Try living with one.

10

I go to the kitchen and unlock the door to the darkroom: my sanctuary, her temple. It is neat and quiet. Some enlargements have dried. Two shots, in particular, intrigue me. One is of her face: profile shot, close-up, black-and-white, head slightly inclined towards the camera, looking down. She was brushing some hair from her face and licking the corner of her mouth at the same time. I have cropped everything but her face, her finger and knuckles. Tongue, fingers, lips. Eyes downcast. It is as though she has created a nest of herself for me to nuzzle, the tongue - poking out from the corner of her mouth - a delicious clitoris, a soft, hot core. It burns me.

The other photograph shows her crossing the street. She is stepping off the curb into the road, red Bedouin dress billowing. Again: profile of the face: the lower lip silhouetted by the chassis of a white car in the background. She stands out of the crowd behind her like a motif. The wide aperture has rendered everyone behind her slightly out of focus. She looks like their leader; she looks cutting-edge. It is art. I have expressed, exemplified, got her: it is art.

11

I take them to my room, stick them on the rapidly diminishing free space on my wall, then stand and absorb the sight of the hundreds of images of her. As my eye darts from one frame to the next, as I mentally combine sequences into motion, I find myself responding to her expressions. Then she is responding to me, interrupting me, leading the conversation. She is funny, awesome, overwhelming. Then she skips away, pirouettes, winks and blows me a kiss, leaving me spinning. We've danced, had the time of our lives.

I am in love.

13

Still fifteen a half-hour before three: I go to the kitchen and prepare a sandwich. The rats, our communal pets, scamper out of their cage at the smell of polony. I give them each a small section and they dive back into their lair to devour the meat with frantic, savage nibbles. Mary insists that we feed them only vegetables which is ludicrous because not only are they instinctual and omnivorous scavengers to whom a chunk of polony is fucking *manna*, but she isn't even a vegetarian herself. It's a knot of hypocrisy anthropomorphic projection: she wants trim rats. I feed them everything, all the time. They love me for it.

I am spreading mayonnaise on a slice of bread when Derrick wafts in like a fetid fart and flicks the kettle on. We ignore each other. He sprawls out on the couch with a massive reefer and switches the television on with the remote control. Larry King is leaning into his turd of a microphone, forehead wrinkled, the typecast owl, and whines questions to Jodie Foster. Hollywood: the myth-makers of our time; Larry King: milking it for every drop of hype it's worth. The smoke from Derrick's joint curls into and around the streaks of afternoon sunlight. Derrick and Larry, bound, each to each other, by habitual compulsions. At least Larry gets paid.

I take my sandwich into my room and close the door behind me. Could've sworn I saw him tilt his head slightly to catch a peek into my room...

14

At around ten to three, I move from my bed to the window and survey the house with my binoculars, camera at hand. Nothing. Three o'clock. Nothing. I sit and wait for another half-an-hour. The door doesn't open. He'll probably only be out by seven by which time it will be too dark. Christ, what are they *doing* in there? I stifle the rush of thoughts before they can snowball. I breathe slowly and deeply. I lean my forehead on the window pane as the day draws to an end, my breath condensing, evaporating, condensing. I concentrate on it, make myself calm. Slowly and deeply. Thoughts of her and her alone, her just walking, just walking towards me, soothe over me. I can smell her. Slowly and deeply. I can wait like this for ever if I must.

15

The following morning I see her leave and walk up the street to Main Road that leads into Rondebosch. I snatch up my camera bag and follow her. I am good at this by now, it is almost second nature, routine. She stops at a the café, emerges with a newspaper and a chocolate bar. There is a spring in her step today, her chin is up, she shakes her hair into the wind often. My trigger finger itches. I must be patient. She stops at the Fruit Basket, occupies a table, and is served a coffee. I make my way across the street to the cemetery. From there I can see her perfectly. I lean on a gravestone to steady myself, spin off a few shots of her reading, sipping coffee. With each shutter-click the camera feels heavier and I feel lighter. Then he arrives. She smiles at him - click/whirr, click/whirr. They kiss, he sits opposite her. He says something. She laughs, nods - click/whirr, click/whirr, click/whirr. He gets up, moves the chair closer to her, between us. I have to stop myself from shouting across to them in rage, throwing my camera in frustration. No other clear perspective unless I am prepared to risk getting dangerously close. The back of his head: laughing at me. I can not watch this. I go home. There is a feeling in my throat, a rotting inside.

16

A knock on my door. I know it's Derrick (the inimitable, irritating *tappidy-tap thud*) before I hear him calling me.

"What?" I answer.

"I need to speak to you."

I open my door and stick my head out, raise my eyebrows.

"You and Mary together," he says. Something's up and so go my defenses. Mary is already in the lounge, flabby arms folded. I look from her to Derrick, then back to her. She shrugs.

"I'm moving out," Derrick announces.

I have to stop myself from doing a little jig and whooping with joy.

"Really?" says Mary. "When?"

"Probably by the end of this week," he actually sounded apologetic! "I know it's short notice but I got an offer to tutor at Wits. Sartre and Foucault. I'll be staying with my sister..."

Well, Derrick, ol' buddy ol' pal. Sure will miss ya. Be sure to send lots of postcards of smoggy mine-dumps and suburban barbed wire. Oh, and while you're there, kindly wander around Hillbrow shouting racist obscenities. Antagonise a Nigerian drug baron or two for me, will you? They might be able to help you with your little... curiosity problem.

I said: "Need help packing?"

17

I was in a good mood for days thereafter. Not even the ape could discourage me, and his relationship with Her seemed to be flourishing. They spend increasingly longer periods of time with each other. Often, they would leave the house together, hand in hand, and walk up to the main street. I didn't bother following them both. I was in a good mood anyway.

18

Then one morning I am standing on the balcony, feeling the chill of the air. Autumn nigh. I see the ape arrive in a bakkie. He usually drives a red golf. As soon as he turns the engine off, she leaps out of the door into his arms. She was waiting for him. They both look ecstatic. Something's going on.

I fetch my camera.

He goes inside, then emerges a few minutes later carrying a small television set, puts it in the back of the bakkie, goes back inside. I'm piqued. I wait for her to come out. She does, carrying a pot plant. They go in together, arms around each other. Then they come out carrying a futon. My jaw drops, world spins. Next the ape and another person who lives in the house, a lanky goth who I sometimes see buying film at Audiolens, come out carrying the base of the bed. Bile rises in my throat, hot and sudden.

Panic. *WHAM*. A thousand demons screaming:

No.

The camera slips through my numbing fingers, falls to the floor, smashes. Derrick glances up from his book in the lounge. "What's happening?" he drones, then looks to the camera at my feet. "Jesus Christ, Wal-" Vision blurring. I could vomit on him right now. I really could. Gulping air, I stagger past him to the front door.

19

I don't know what I'm doing. I'm hurtling down the stairs, flight-at-a-time, but I don't know what I'm doing. I hear my own panting echoing off the stairwell walls, bestial, fierce. I fumble with the latch on the main entrance. All this is happening but I don't know *why*.

I won't admit it to myself.

Then I burst out into the open, suffocating. I careen around the corner of Greenhouse Street to see her hugging the goth as the ape gets into the bakkie and guns the engine. He is grinning that smug, chinkful grin of his. I quicken my pace towards them. For some reason, I am limping. There is no pain.

When I am approximately fifteen meters away from them, she notices me. That is: her face turns towards me and looks directly into my eyes. I flinch. After two and-a-half months of secret surveillance, of bringing her close enough to me through a lens to lick and smell, the nakedness of the confrontation stops me in mid-stride. The universe takes a breath. I feel my ears and cheeks inflame. She is about to turn away from me.

"Where are you going?"

My voice comes out high-pitched and plaintive. She doesn't respond; frowns (I know it so well, that puckering of skin between her eyebrows). She gets into the passenger seat of the car where he is waiting for her, looking equally puzzled. *Who's that*: I read his lips. She shrugs, shakes her head, kisses him. He slots the car into gear and reverses into a neighboring driveway to turn around.

I stand there, in the middle of the road, watching this. The bakkie swerves back onto the road in front of me. The ape hoots. I am watching her through the windscreen. I can barely make out her features for the reflections on the pane, but when I catch her eyes the blood crystallizes in my veins. Painful bravado now. The ape sticks his head out of the window and shouts something, hoots again.

He gets out of the car, approaches me. He is saying something, some words. I don't even look at him. He is at this very instant what he has always been: an irritation, ethereal. I am looking at her, trying to see her through the glass. Then I'm off my feet and on the tarmac with a thud. He is standing over me, mouthing sounds and pointing. I try to stand up but he pushes me down again. The pain in my foot is suddenly a problem. He gets back in the car but I can't stand up.

Something breaks. A dull crack somewhere in my solar plexus, an implosion. Tears on my chin. I am on the side of the road. The bakkie zooms past me.

All this with the impossibly smooth severity of a dream.

20

Photographs of her carpet my room. I lie on them, feeling the cool gloss of each one on my skin. Some of them are warped with semen and tears.

My foot hurts, even through the pain.

21

My world has become a cocoon of purposelessness. I have broken two toes on my right foot, so debilitating and unpoetic a crippling, that it's poetic. I spend my days over-indulging in prescription painkillers and smoking Derrick's marijuana. I sleep as much as I can, and then some. I don't think I could sleep without the painkillers, and I don't care to find out. I find myself wishing that Derrick would stay, but he is leaving tomorrow. We sit in the lounge in comfortable Codeine silence. The only pertinent thing he said to me was: "What about the darkroom?" The way he said it: I think he knows everything. Instead of gnaw me as it used to, this knowledge assuages me. He is leaving, though, anyway, and a friend of Mary's, some grotesque literature-junkie such as herself, no doubt, is moving in. This matters little, means less. Martin Amis could move in tomorrow and I'll probably just tell him to fill the kettle, wash the bath and take the garbage out every third Wednesday.

I contemplate interrogating the goth, then suicide, then wresting another joint from Derrick. The marijuana and painkillers go together so well that some friends of Derrick's are interested in buying some from me.

I will sell a few; I need the money.

22

In my dream she is holding a painting of herself out towards me. I take it but it is torn. It is a painting of me, of her, of him. It is torn. I wake, see her. Sleep, see her. Torn.

23

The third night consecutively that I've dreamt the same dream. I have a theory that emotions are more important than images in dreams, but I can't seem to recall the feeling of the dream. Perhaps because it's the same one I go to sleep and wake with? Hollow rage? Impotence? Something broken inside.

I wake and feel the crumple of several photographs among the sheets beneath me. I pull one out and straighten it. She looks at me, pitying my pain. My bandaged toes throb, for her. "It's okay," I tell her. I press the photo to my chest.

Later, I hobble out of my room. Mary is in the lounge, watching a movie with a young Clint Eastwood in Nazi regalia in it. She seems to have lost weight. Everything seems to have lost weight.

"Derrick says goodbye," she says.

"Oh," I say, and go to the kitchen. Coffee.

"So that's the way it's gonna be," says Clint.

Later that day, I am dividing my photographs of her into piles, organising sequences, when I hear the intercom buzz. Mary thunders over to let whoever it is in. A minute later, there are the sounds of greetings at the front door.

"Walter! Come and meet our new flatmate!" I hear Mary bleat.

Ah, for Christ's magnanimous sake, I really don't need this in my life. Life's one long tea-party to these people. If they had to add up the minutes they spent on superfluous introductions, small-talk and uttered crap, they could have read all of Shakespeare.

"Walter!"

Fuck. I get up, open my door, stumble out, and behold an angel. She has the same lips, the same hair. Her eyes are enormous, feline, slow in blinking. Olive skin, faint perfume of Turmeric and tobacco.

Looking right at me, smiling. Nothing between us.

"Hello Walter," she says, her voice the purl of a breezy field.

"Walter, this is Candice," Mary gestures, beaming.

The best I can do is consciously raise my lower jaw and nod.

24

Derrick's old room and mine share a wall. I am drilling a hole in it.

Last night, while Candice and Mary were out, I measured the precise location of an empty screw-socket in the permanent mirror on her side of the wall, then did the same on mine and marked it with a pen. I am drilling there now. The noise is deafening. I borrowed the drill from the caretaker, a doddering old fool. Camp, at that. I had to buy a special masonry bit for the job. It was cheap but I'm nearly broke again.

Mary went to intellectually masturbate at some Post-graduate poetry meeting and I skulked around until Candice left before I could start drilling.

When the bit reaches a certain depth, I remove it and scrape away the remaining centimeters with a Phillips screwdriver, periodically blowing away macadamized concrete and brick. It's painstaking, but necessary so. Soon I feel the thin layer of plaster give way and I can see into her room. My aim is just very slightly off so I widen the aperture to see better, press my eye right up against the wall. I am looking directly at her bed. I imagine her on it, hands absent-mindedly moving down from her breasts to remove the stratum of negligee on her torso. I suppress a volcanic fit of mirth at my ingenuity. I am fucking brilliant. I should convert the darkroom into a sauna.

I press my face more tightly against the peephole. The harder I press, the more I can see. Fucking brilliant, I tell you. I light a cigarette and wait for my lovely to return. Where the hell is she? I mutter her name out loud. "Candice..." Chant: "Can-dice, Can-dice..." Take a black marker from a jar of pens next to my bed, push its thick felt tip hard against the wall, write:

C - A - N...

I will wait for you.

Rex D. Trueform, the Mystery Man and a Ghost

Details don't come cheap. I charge five percent of the client's projected annual turnover up front, plus expenses (whatever raises a film of sweat on their foreheads, basically, and I like to eat well), plus another five percent when the job was done. Now let me tell you, I thought I'd seen it all: I'd been pampered from Monaco to Zbek: they even serve me single-malt in Dubai, but when Meyrick Stanford led me to Tsuyoshi Tukumora's private jet I nearly choked on my tie. It was a polished, black, twin-finned Priapus of a craft. It had tinted windows. Tinted windows. *Tinted windows.*

"For your comfort, Mr Trueform," grinned Stanford as we ascended along the chrome ramp.

"How thoughtful," said I.

A coiffured stewardess with lips like ripe fruit and buns like buns served us a brimming seafood platter when we were in the air. I nibbled at salmon and shrimps over my laptop, scrolling through stock points and general economic backstabbery for a while, then leaned back into the black leather seat and closed my eyes. After a moment of deliberation I switched on my earpiece. Statistics crackled softly in my ear. I once had this little contraption tuned to a rebel radio station that had been transmitting in rhetorical albeit brocken English from Librazhd, Albania for three days and made a quick half-mil with the information gleaned thereof. Things happen so quickly, so subtly nowadays, and minor shifts in the capricious political moods of our planet can make all the difference. Details count. Details are the name of the game.

I need to know everything, everything, all the time.

Take this job for instance. My target was typical enough: James Thomas Jefferson, 67, started out importing cheap and cheesy prints of the Madonna from Puerto Rico and selling them to Puerto Rican emigrants in Miami and New Mexico. Today he monopolizes nearly all mass-produced religious artifacts in the Western Hemisphere. Born and educated in Stuart, Florida to a pair of high-school sweethearts, Jefferson has one older sister (Mary-Lee), he is twice divorced, no children, and regularly stumbles back onto the wagon after alcohol rehabilitation (each time at a different and more luxurious clinic, each time under a pseudonym). He now lives in Chicago wit his first wife (Ms. Zha-Zha Pizda-Bolshoya) and twenty seven cats. Of these, eighteen are Tabby Point Siamese but his prize is a blue and green eyed Cornish Rex called Bijoux. A charitable chap, Jimmy gives somewhat exorbitant monthly donations to the Holy Torch Church run by the TV celebrity Reverend Tommy Wellgreen and the P.K. Simpson Cat Hospital in Davenport, Iowa, wherein his parents mysteriously resided prior to their mysteriously simultaneous deaths. Jefferson has recurring dreams about his half-aunt, one Sabina du Pont of Chanpagne (now deceased) wherein he massages her breasts with menstrual blood before masturbating into her nostrils.

Details.

Details are important and shrinks are cheap.

My client was Tsuyoshi Tukumora, 44, a Reborn Christian ex-cigar tycoon with his heart and his faith and his money in the right place. All I knew about him was that he was rich enough to pay me thrice-fold and that he had good taste in planes. That was enough.

"Cigar?" Meyrick Stanford tapped me lightly on the shoulder.

"No need to touch," I said, eyeing his fingertips. "I can hear you perfectly well."

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry. It's just that you had that thing in your ear and..."

"In one ear. The other was enjoying the peculiarly pitched hum of the cabin."

Though I didn't particularly dislike Meyrick Stanford, I do like to sharpen my tongue every now and then. Practice makes perfect and all that. Besides which, I know what he wants, what they all want, these cronies and gimps that cart me around at their masters' behests. Meyrick Stanford wants to know what it is, exactly, that I do. Because Meyrick Stanford most probably thinks that I am the most powerful man in the universe third only to the President of the United States of America and God, because Meyrick Stanford thinks that any man who can get Tsuyoshi Tukumora to roll over and wag at the same time must shit dollars and piss Veuve, because Meyrick Stanford is a Yank. A full-blown quarterback. America's finest.

He wants what I've got, but has no idea what it is I have. Stanford's itching. It is true that the physiological symptoms of love and fear are the same: pupil dilation, perspiration, increased heart and respiration rates; this is why teenagers watch horror movies together on the couch under a blanket. I'm willing to bet that when Stanford looks at me, it is with the baleful repression of a shit-scared, love-struck adolescent.

The one and only thing I detest about this job is that I never get to work with the bosses themselves. I am tended to by their secretaries and second-in-commands, their PR bozos and translator finks as if I were some kind of a criminal.

What I do is perfectly legal. Well, not illegal. In fact, legality has nothing to do with it. Real criminality is inherently, physically violent and I detest violence. Real criminality is unjust and I abhor injustice. I present a non-violent means to a perfectly fair end. No, legality has nothing to do with it. Details. Details are what this job is all about.

I thought I had found/created the perfect job, but there is something about the word 'job' which immediately connotes an almost necessary malcontent. Think about it. Say it: "job". So droll. So jowl-forming. Makes me think of wiping dishes, 'job', or becoming a drone. And that's what I do, what we all do, to keep ourselves alive. We job, and we are malcontent.

So there I was, my head lolling on a leather plane seat that looked and smelt like it had been re-upholstered for the flight. I was reaching for a cigar but could have easily let my hand brush the largely exposed and undeniably firm bosom of the blonde stewardess who was offering me the box of Montecristos as if I were some temperamental Greek god. But I was malcontent because I wasn't being offered the cigar by Tukumora himself, because I was on the job.

I lit the cigar slowly and flopped back into the seat. I must admit that I enjoy the occasional nicotine-saturation of a cigar. It was a good cigar, smooth but strong. It smelt like the under-side of a recently ridden saddle on a spit, roasting over a fire in the wilderness. Slightly sweet.

Meyrick Stanford was watching me puff away, eyes wide, and I expected his inevitable prying to begin at any moment. I could almost smell his sniffing through the smoke.

No sooner had I removed my earpiece than:

"I was just wondering, Mr. Trueform," he was trying to make the query sound as casual as possible, "where exactly did you go to college?"

"We don't have colleges where I come from," I replied without turning to face him. I didn't need to. Stanford was a classic PR gimp, all soap-opera hairstyle and polished teeth framed by anvil jaw, trained in polite firmness and coprophagous platitudes. The trick is to tell them the truth, which is what they least expect and what they have been taught, at all costs, to avoid.

"No colleges in the U.K.?" he didn't sound so much incredulous as amazed.

"I'm not from England," I tilted my head to him. I knew exactly what he was going to say next. The accent...

"Your accent..."

"...is South African. I went to University in Cape Town."

Now: Ah, Africa...

"Ah. That's very interesting. I've never met an African before."

"Actually the only time I feel African is when I'm in Europe. When I'm in Africa I feel quite European."

"Well, how do you feel in the States?" drawled Stanford, fishing.

"Superior, mostly superior."

Stanford's grin froze. He tried to chuckle but instead made a rasping, guttural sound, then retreated back into his seat. That shut him up. See? Whap 'em wit da troot. Out for the count. Such a typical doe-eyed gimp, this Stanford. So easily nonplussed. Of course, he wanted more than anything in the world to swing a punch at me now. Out of the corners of my eyes I could see his veins throbbing with the desire to attack me. Most of them do, in the end, these subordinate goons and bunnies, especially those of the quarterback strain. But they know the consequences of such a pugilistic paroxysm in this primarily verbal world.

With Stanford canned, it was going to be a pleasantly conversation-free journey. I went back to my laptop.

I tried to get hold of Starwipe, first on our ComLink, then at the Soothsayer Cybercafe but she was nowhere to be found. It had been at least twelve hours since our last liaison. Twelve hours is the standard break after which we can usually link up no matter what time zone we're in. It just works out that way. I scanned some other haunts, just in case. No Starwipe. I remember the last communication we had; it was on the direct line. I'd joked about severing all communications after she threatened to track me down to find out what I looked like. "You wouldn't," she replied. "Think so?" I taunted. "You need me," she typed. "Think so?" I repeated. She: "Know so, Mystery Man." Now, sitting on the plane with Stanford, I began to wonder if it was true. I'd never had many friends, preferring the self-righteousness of anonymity. Until now, I didn't think I needed them.

I switched my earpiece back on and heard that Bovox and MetaCorp had each gone down three points after lunch in Tokyo. Sam had obviously not heeded my advice. The only inside information that inside traders accept is from other insiders. Talk about a snake choking on its own tail. I am glad that my livelihood does not depend on these capricious, incestuous marketplaces as much as topple them. I keep

all the money I earn in the stress-free, smoke-free, ever-accessible environment of a Swiss bank account. Safe and sound and anonymous. Just like me.

The flight took almost ten hours. It felt like three. Then there we were: the armpit of the universe, human nature's manifestation of its collective guts and arsehole: America. Ah, America... with its gullet to huge to choke on its own insatiable greed.

There are two things I absolutely despise in this world: Americans and mushrooms. There is one thing I adore more than anything: tinted windows. Among other reasons aesthetic and practical, tinted windows are a sign of attention to detail.

Chicago looked like a cluster of giant industrial heaters as we came swooping over Lake Michigan to land. Smoke billowed from the tops of its sky scrapers. We landed in O'Hare Airport at a quarter past six on Tuesday morning. It was snowing. Donning our overcoats, a sulking Meyrick Stanford and I were escorted to the limousine by a uniformed driver with a handlebar mustache.

I was to meet with Jimmy Jefferson later that day. This was my one and only chance to get my foot in the door. I assured Tukumora that one meeting was all it would take. Stanford hardly spoke a word to me on the way to the hotel, which was unusual for a gimp of his caliber. They are usually more resilient, more fun, but he just buried himself in some documents, sitting opposite me, shuffling through the papers on his lap, sullen and reticent and eager to be done with this mysterious assignment. Why do I feel these ludicrous pangs of sympathy for him? He is ignorant because I have willed it so. I insisted that Tukumora tell him nothing, nothing at all. It was one of my conditions for accepting the assignment. I am too kind hearted, perhaps; too soft.

I timed the appointment to perfection, arriving two minutes after Jefferson who was exactly seven minutes late. He was fuming. Well, that was easy enough. I needed him angry because he was rich, and rich people have two compulsive states of emotion: anger and contempt. All rich people get there because they are angry enough. Big business is built on aggression.

All poor people are sad, by the way, by way of logical corollary.

The restaurant was posh and almost completely empty. Some of the chairs were on the tables and piles of soiled tablecloths were being collected by the waitrons off the floor. The maitre 'd who showed me to Jefferson's table explained that they were not usually open for lunch and that the chef owes Jimmy a favour and that they had a big party there the previous night. He led me to the table where Jefferson sat hunched over his whiskey like a time-bomb. I had Jimmy Jefferson in the state of mind that makes him tick. He had a corner-mouth twitch and was frowning so hard that his whole head looked volatile. Besides that, he looked remarkably good for an august sexagenarian, especially a rich one. His chin and nose looked like the barnacled hulls of submerged schooners.

To my dismay, Jefferson was flanked by his lawyer, Sheryl Deede, who I recognised immediately. I'd never actually dealt with her before, not directly, but I knew that she used to work for Garth McLanalan, a porn mogul who had his finger in almost every pie I bit until he tried to point them at Vincent Peroz of the Peroz Family last year. McLanalan's head was found impaled on a stick on the

front lawn of 'Bucho' Bello's house with all ten digits stuffed into the mouth, nostrils, ears and throat. Anyway, Deede was a formidable looking bitch with pencilled eyebrows and a reputation for cocaine.

I was not expecting her so I decided to deal with her there and then. I knew it would have to happen sooner or later, I knew we would have to meet, and there was only one thing that could happen when we did. It was about to. Jefferson waited until I opened my mouth to greet him, then spoke:

"I'm a busy man," he boomed. "You have exactly eleven minutes."

I ignored him completely.

"Ms. Deede," I said. "What a lovely surprise. I have heard of your work through some colleagues. I was so sorry to hear about Garth. Have they found the body yet?"

Her face was expressionless but drawn. I could see a creeping pink begin to spread beneath the layer of base on her face. She was blushing, the little darling. Strike one. Then her eyes narrowed.

"As a matter of fact they have. And your name is?"

"Trueform. Rex Daniel Trueform. At last, we meet."

Jefferson shook.

"Listen, Trueform, are you here to jerk off or talk money!"

"Actually, Mr. Jefferson," I said, only taking my eyes off Sheryl Deede once I had uttered the last syllable of his name, "what I have to say to you is not about money so much as... piece of mind."

I gave him my most pious insurance salesman nod. Of course, he was having none of it.

"Cut the crap," he growled.

"Life," I said, "dissimulates."

Jefferson looked startled for a second, then burst out laughing. Deede's thin lips curled upward very slightly. She lit a cigarette. I waited for Jefferson to wipe the tears from his eyes with a creased napkin before I continued. From rage to hysteria; this geezer was an emotional live-wire. Perfect. Almost too easy, but not quite.

"Mr. Jefferson," I said, my voice an ice-cube on a hot bonnet, "I don't know if you've ever noticed the motions of a cat walking across a room. Cautious yet sure-footed, wary but relaxed, no matter how tame and domesticated cats live every moment of their lives treading the thin line of the food chain. Cat's, Mr. Jefferson, are never off-guard."

"What's yer point, Trueform?" the feline imagery had blunted Jefferson's voice.

Deede blew her smoke between us like an irritating disco effect.

"I am merely pointing out, Mr. Jefferson, that humans are not so resilient to the narcotic effect of their comfort. Like decadent emperors we reach a stage where our laurels obscure our vision."

"He's crazy," said Deede.

"And you were sucking Vincent Peroz's cock when Garth McLanalan had his head chopped off. I have proof." I projected my voice deep into her defences.

We sat in viscous silence for a full ten seconds. Jefferson eyed Deede. I eyed Deede. Deede, suddenly drained, shot me a glare which was a mixture of fear and repulsion. I held her eyes, smug.

"I don't... you're crazy," she stammered, a slight inflection to her voice. Then she clumsily put her cigarette out in the ashtray, stood up and walked off. She had nice legs.

Jefferson put his drink down. I shrugged.

"Now you listen here, ya little..."

"Mr. Jefferson, regardless of Ms. Deede's prior who-fucked-whos, I want you to know that you aren't anywhere nearly as lucky as she is. For what I am about to tell you, Mr. Jefferson, I have enough proof to run a cover story in Time magazine."

Jefferson paled.

"Peroz knows everything," he said.

"This has nothing to do with Vinnie," I said quickly, knowing very well that if it did it would probably be my head which would end up on a stick. But I was onto something fortuitous here. "You leave Vinnie out of this. This is between you and yourself, Mr. Jefferson. This is your own doing."

"What do you want, Trueform, whatever your name is."

My real name is Michael Pilger. The last person to have called me that was my mother on her deathbed. I still have a passport under that name which I keep for reasons too obscure to mention. I am not a sentimental man.

"On Friday, the Dova crucifixes leave Puerto Rico," I said quietly. "Forget the Dova stock."

It takes a certain tone of voice to say something like that to someone like Jimmy Jefferson. It's something that you're born with.

"Or else?"

"I'm not making any threats, Jimmy. Not yet. Just call Miguel tomorrow and tell him that you've changed your mind. The two of you have been friends for years. He'll understand. Tell him you want to invest the money in a new house this month. It's that simple."

I was wondering how far I'd have to push him when he stood up, his jowls shaking, his lips twitching, neck twanging, eyes like an orgasmic bull's, and started banging his fist methodically on the table. Some waitrons looked up from polishing the silverware.

"Now you listen to me ya lousy little English worm! You shut'cher mouth an listen good, ya filthy maggot! I don't know who you are or what you want with the Dova stock, and I don't give a camel fart in the desert, but those crucifixes leave San Juan on Thursday even if I have to row them to Miami *myself*. I didn't start this business to have some two-bit confidence clown walk in on my lunch one day and start telling me how to run it. Now..."

"Forget the Dova stock, Jimmy."

"Or what, ya..."

"Or Mary-Lee gets a letter from the cat hospital explaining mom and dad, Zha-Zha finds out about Malorie Jenkins, the press discover the truth about your bleeding statue in San Diego, and Bijoux joins your dearest Auntie Sabina in the great pattery in the sky."

His face grew redder and redder as what I was saying sunk home, but - as I had calculated - at the mention of my trump card, Aunt Sabina, Jefferson's knees buckled and he sat down with a plop, his eyes glazed and unblinking. He looked like a man with a wet finger knuckle-deep in a wall socket. I was hoping he wouldn't keel over and start frothing at the mouth; I'm actually quite squeamish. Instead, Jefferson picked up Sheryl Deede's half-finished Martini and put it back with a terse swig.

"It's okay, Jimmy," I said after a while, pitching my voice deep into the psychological wound I'd opened. "It's just the Dova stock. That's all. Nothing more than that. Forget the Dova stock, Jimmy. Everything's going to be okay."

Meyrick Stanford was waiting for me in the limousine.

"How'd it go?" he piped before the driver closed the door for me. I caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath.

"Fine," I said.

"Deede," he gushed, "I saw Deede leave."

"Out of the equation."

"We got Jefferson?"

"Of course," I replied. If he wasn't careful I might have to lay some truth on the bastard.

"How'd you do it?" he whooped.

"Details."

Silence the whole way back.

What I do is not blackmail. Blackmail would be me walking up to Jefferson and demanding money lest his sister discover that he had used specimens of his parents' ageing tissue in genetic immortality experiments. Believe me, that would have sufficed. But that would have been blackmail. And labelling what I do as mere 'extortion' would be an insult. I'm a profoundly moralistic guy. By doing what I did, I am merely executing a fundamental yet somewhat esoteric law of nature: the whole you-get-what-you-deserve what-goes-around-comes-around Yin-Yang thing. You know: karma. You know what I'm talking about. We are spiritual creatures; we feel these things. You and me and Jimmy Jefferson.

What I am saying is what I have said before: I am not a criminal. I suppose you could call me a moral economist. I balance the scales, so to speak. Nothing personal.

If there is a God, he does what I do.

Blessed America waxed and waned beneath me as I gazed out of the window of my Penthouse suite. I watched a black man wearing a purple jacket approach a suit-and-tie in a bus stop. At first the suit balked and clutched his briefcase closer to him, fidgeting nervously with the combination latches. Then the black man whipped out a rag and began to polish the suit's shoes with overwhelming vigour. The suit relaxed a bit. A policeman approached them. At the sight of the cop, the shoe-shiner stuffed his cloth into a bag and hurried away without looking back. The suit grinned at the policeman. The policeman smiled back, nodding. This land conforms so neatly, this nation of clockwork mice. America is so conservative, complicit. Everyone smiles a lot. No questions asked. There is nothing for me here except money. America is one big job.

Tukumora phoned a precisely six thirty. He was so pleased with the news that he wanted me to come back to Tokyo to work on another 'investment' that needed 'clinching'. But that would be breaking the rules. I never work for the same client twice, too risky. He offered me thirty percent, told me - in rapid-

fire slogans and glistening lips - that the Dova stock was just the beginning of a major economic paradigm shift from west to east. Still, I declined.

"But tell me, Mithah Truefoh," Tukumora gasped at last, "How. How did you do it?"

"What goes around comes around," I said.

Cryptic, yes, but it was the truth. A little koan of sorts. When I pushed the end-call button he was still cackling away. Money makes people rich people so happy. And it makes them so sad.

I poured myself three fingers of cognac. I had two days to spend in Chicago, as arranged, to make sure that Jefferson wouldn't squirm. He wouldn't, I was certain. All I had to do was make one short phone call and mention Aunt Sabina again. I could make that phone call from anywhere in the world, but there I was anyway. On the job. I opened my laptop and drank my drink.

Starwipe was chatting to some Irish militant calling himself Fistt (sic) when I found her. The Soothsayer was packed with the usual mob of surfers and bleaters.

-GREETINGS FROM THE WINDY CITY, STAR :), I typed.

-WELL IF IT ISN'T MY MYSTERY MAN, came the ever-cool response. YOU'RE IN CHICAGO!!!!???

-AFFIRMATIVE.

-ME TOO. NEED TO SEE YOU.

There was a knock on the door.

-SOMEONE AT THE DOOR. TAKE 5.

I got up and fetched the gun from my briefcase. Stanford looked like a stupid mutant through the peep-hole. Somewhere between his tremendous jaw and mass of scalloped hair wrinkled a tiny smile. I put the gun away. Since hearing of my success, Stanford had been fawning over me like a drooling chimp. When I opened the door, he still wore the same, dazzled expression as I had left him with.

"Rex," he intoned, drunk. His jacket looked like it had been used as a picnic blanket. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"As a matter of fact..."

"It's just that I spoke to Mr. Tukumora and he said for me to..."

"Go away Stanford," I said, "you're drunk," and closed the door in his face.

I pressed my ear to the door until I heard the soft, carpeted thud of his footsteps recede in the direction of the elevator, then went back to my laptop. Fistt was grilling Starwipe about me. People who get jealous over cyber-relationships are pathetic. They believe everything they read.

-FUCK OFF, PADDY, I rattled, YOU THERE, STAR?

-WHICH HOTEL ARE YOU IN? That's Starwipe. Straight to the point.

-BELMONT.

-FANCY A DRINK?

-I'LL BE WEARING A RED TIE.

Half an hour later I was sitting in the foyer of the hotel, sipping Remy Martin and smoking a cigarette. It is the nature of my job not to get too close to anyone. I strike then disappear, leaving a trail of nothing but consummate justice in my wake. I usually do little more than order room service while I'm on the job. This social occurrence was a major exception and, moreover, a startling coincidence. Nevertheless, this particular assignment had 'pleasant sojourn' written all over it from the very beginning, and it was time to ease up a bit. I could afford to relax a bit.

Starwipe and I had been chatting over the Internet for several months. She knew me better than some of my best enemies ever will. I was nervous. There was something about Starwipe which fascinated me. I was, perhaps, narcissistically obsessed with her secretiveness. Of all the hundreds of words we exchanged, I knew very little about her. No details. Just trivial banter and youthful jest.

This was all about to change.

Sheryl Deede walked in through the revolving door of the hotel, strode right up to me, her eyes fixed on my crimson silk tie, and hissed: "You..."

I have always relied on my tongue. I am a man of many words. It's a gift. But for the first time since I uttered my first nonsense syllable, for the first time in a life's span of cunning linguistic stunts, eloquent ranting and verbose persuasion, as the horrific realisation that Starwipe and Sheryl Deede were one and the same dawned on me, so did the fact that I was - for the very first time - utterly speechless.

"Ms. Deede," I eventually managed to gulp. "What a remarkable coincidence."

Her eyes flashed through a dozen emotions before welling up with tears. Her lips - surgically enhanced - seemed to throb, then tremble.

"You," she sobbed. "Fuck."

She began to cry. People were watching us. A pimple-faced porter stood up and gaped. I sneered at him. He looked away. Deede noticed this and promptly sat down, sniffing and wiping tears from her cheeks. I perched on the seat next to hers and reached for my drink.

"You must admit," I repeated, calmer for some reason in the wake of her spontaneous outburst, but still quite bewildered, "it is a remarkable coincidence."

Shaking her head, she pouted at me from behind a veil of hair. With one side tucked behind her ear, it made her look like a precocious juvenile. She lit a cigarette.

"This isn't a-a fucking co-in-cidence," she moaned. "This is f-fucking life telling me... telling me something. I lost my fucking job because of you and now you turn out to be my... my... (sobs) my mystery... fucking... man. The one person I thought I could count on, I thought I could trust, without all the... all the bullshit. I feel so... fucking... alone."

Her voice warbled through the last sentence and the final syllable turned into a low moan in her throat. She looked like she was on the verge of tears again.

Something came over me.

"If it's any consolation, Sheryl," I heard myself say. "I felt alone tonight, too."

The truth of the statement took me by surprise. I slurped my cognac and tried to reason with myself: now that she was out of a job, she posed no threat. Fair game.

"Would you like a drink?" I said, finishing mine and using my smoothest here-kitty tone.

I looked up to call a waiter and caught a glimpse of what could have been either a large squirrel or a ladies fur collar ducking behind a pillar in front of the elevator. I thought nothing of it, but then the elevator doors slid open and I saw the animal leap into it, riding the football-bruised, distended dome of none other than a skulking Meyrick Stanford. Our eyes met for a split second before a host of people and luggage-laden porters crammed in after him, but I could see his Hawaiian-wave of hair bobbing above the lot as the doors slid shut. Several trillion thoughts swooped down on me from many directions.

"Oh, Jesus," I concluded softly to myself.

Sheryl Deede was staring at her cigarette. She looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

"So tell me something, Mystery Man," she said, her voice crackling sexily.

She was trying to force a frown but her eyes were half-pleading, half-resigned. Somewhere behind them, I surmised, beat a slowly numbing heart. I could tell that this was a woman on the brink of another tier of nervous collapse. Such breakdowns are never a one-off thing. They happen in stages. And Sheryl Deede was hanging on the verge of another sliding level. She was scratching at the edge. This hitherto tough banshee had been reduced to a weeping schoolgirl before my very eyes. I wanted to take her into my arms and fuck her brains out. I had never felt like this before. The desire to fuck, yes, but never the hold-in-arms thing. I felt slightly queasy.

"Jesus," I muttered again. This time she heard me.

"If that's your real name," she said, "I can see why you'd settle for something like Rex."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. *Stanford*, my mind howled. *Stanford!* Something else inside me was saying something else, but I had never heard anything come from my solar plexus before and it was, in any case, deep and muffled and easier to ignore. *Stanford*, on the other hand, was the roar of a thousand stadiums.

"Wait here," I said absent-mindedly. I got up and walked to the elevator. I went up to the seventh floor and knocked on Stanford's door. No reply. The room was completely silent. I knocked again, waited, banged harder. Then harder. Nothing. A burly old man in pyjamas stepped into the corridor and said something to me. I ignored him. I was pacing up and down, my thoughts a deafening, adrenalized roar.

Deede, they shrieked, *Deede!*

The elevator ride back down seemed to take a lifetime. I rushed back to the table where we had been sitting but it was empty. There was a napkin spread out on it with the following words written on it in dark red lipstick:

GO FUCK
YOURSELF
MYSTERY
MAN

*

Back in my suite, I poured myself another stiff one and as soon as I took my first sip the others seemed to catch up. I finished the glass anyway, poured another. The drunker I got the worse the situation looked. Stanford phones Tukumora; Tukumora phones Jefferson; Jefferson phones Deede; Deede phones Peroz... Or vice versa. Or any one of these grim permutations.

Either way, Rex Trueform is a dead man. I stood up quickly, ready to pack my bag when the phone rang. The room spun painfully. I wrestled the phone off the hook and held the receiver in both hands, knuckles white.

"Ghagh?" phlegm in my throat.

"Rex?"

Deede!

"Sheryl. Listen."

"You fool. Get out of there right now. You goddamned fool."

Line cut.

A knock on the door.

Gun.

I approached the door in a dream, the gun held out in front of me, trigger-finger trembling. Again the knock. I peered into the peep-hole but saw only blackness. The person on the other side had a finger over the lens. I drew back. As if on cue, the knock.

"Stanford? Is that you?"

"Rex D. Trueform," came the reply, muffled by the door, masculine but unrecognisable.

I said nothing, nonplussed, petrified.

"Walter Peck," said the voice. A chill crept up my throat, around my ears and clung to the back of my neck like a lizard, fear licking its cold lips. "Charles Browning. Garfield Simmonds. David Nussbaum. Cyril Skid."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Oh God. Oh no.

I was waiting for it, waiting for Michael Pilger, ready to ventilate the door in front of me at the mention of that final straw. But it didn't come. I saw the peep-hole lighten and dashed up to it but all I saw was the corridor leading up to a closing elevator door and a shadowy figure therein disappear.

My heart in my throat, I put the gun in my briefcase with the laptop, cautiously crept down the corridor, found an open room where a cleaning lady was making the bed and climbed out the window there, skinning the tips of my fingers on the freezing metal of the fire escape as I made my way down five storeys to a back alley.

Exit Rex Daniel Trueform, his predecessors, his progeny. I booked onto the next flight to South Africa as Michael Pilger.

As soon as I landed in Jan Smuts Airport, some fifteen hours later, I checked the paper. The Dova stock had gone through. The web had closed but the fly had flown. How I survived that drunken night in

the hotel room was beyond me. Either Jefferson was more moronic or Stanford more pusillanimous than I thought. One thing was for sure: it was over. I know when to quit. It was over.

Despite the loss of Tukumora's extra five percent, I still had enough money to buy a house and enjoy a comfortable living for a long time. It was time to settle down. The economic angel had folded his wings and come home to roost. Cape Town, South Africa is where it would have to be. It's the first place they'd look, the last place that would yield me. But I had to steer clear of any city for a while. I bought a car and drove South to the semi-desert.

For a week and safety's sake, I lived in a desert-motel just outside Colesberg. I read, watched TV and thought a lot. I spent my time brooding, stifling regrets and staving depression. Then something happened. I was walking along the single main street of the town, back to the motel, when suddenly, and for no conscious reason, a tremendous, epiphanic wave of relief flooded through me, over me like a cool shower. Relief. I stood there on the pavement with my face to the sun, took my sunglasses off and began to giggle like a lunatic. Either you are going mad, I told myself, or everything's going to be all-right.

I took this paroxysm of hysteria as a good omen, a signal from myself for it being time to leave. That night, I packed my car and drove to Cape Town.

I bought myself a wooden cabin set into the mountainside in Noordhoek, Cape Town. I paid cash, installed tinted windows. The cabin overlooked a long and wide stretch of beach along which I would walk for hours, watching the waves and the surfers weaving their passionate wakes on them. I bought a dog, named him Rex. I learnt how to cook.

For almost a year now I have lived this life of frugal, clandestine seclusion, of abhorrence of detail. As this time came to pass I realised that this way of life had changed from a contingent retreat to a quotidian routine. I, Michael Pilger, who once wielded details like spells, am now caged by them. I do not do my grocery shopping locally or in the same place regularly, I can not socialise. I can not be seen, heard or felt. Although I do not live in fear, the price of my anonymity is steep and hollow. I pay it - into it - like some sort of living expense. A tax. Thus am I granted the privilege of a slow fade into old age.

Nevertheless, since my epiphany in Colesberg I have been clear of all regrets except one: Sheryl Deede. She did try to save my life, after all. She is my only loose end. Although my former life is a frayed plat of these, they were more easy to sever than I thought. It was easy to simplify my life enough in order to remain smooth and transparent, a mere matter of humility and caution. What kept me up at night, however, was my inability to tourniquet the thought of Sheryl Deede and the feeling which these thoughts of her cultivated in my soul.

I can not afford to feel lonely. Anything but that. It is too much to bear.

I woke up this morning after an increasingly recurrent dream of her striding up the long beach bellow the house with her arms open to embrace me. I could not shake it this time as on other mornings. This

time the dream stuck; it struck. Although I have stopped trying to find her on the Net, the hope that somehow she will find me flares on mornings such as this.

The late-morning sun has lifted the morning mist in the valley to the east but there is still a fine haze in the still air that puts everything into soft-focus. I see a woman walking towards the house from where I stand on the veranda. She is walking up from the beach. I watch her brush her hair from her mouth. She looks so much like her. It isn't her, I know, but I don't care. She looks *so much* like her. God. I want to leap off the veranda and tell her what a beautiful, beautiful day it is and how beautiful she is making it. I want to say something, do something, something of consequence. I want to speak. To shout. Maybe I did make a sound then because she looks up at me. I wave. But she doesn't even seem to see me. She looks *through* me. She doesn't wave back. She just looks a few centimeters over my right shoulder and away. The most ambitious venture of my new life, a simple wave, thwarted. A mockery. I am suddenly very, very weak. Hapless.

Rex Trueform is dead but Michael Pilger is worse off.

Michael Pilger is a ghost.

Ulysses Godpeck'd: Escape from Ogygia

(To be sung by a blind man to the meandering tune of a lyre.)

Tell me, O muse, some euphuistic news. Tell again of the man on the island. And be prolix, O muse, be profuse. Whisper these tales with your

Our hero is like a speck of fuzzy, glistening lint in the dazzling heat of the beach. Sweat has matted his pubic beard and his forearms are slick as sealskins. He grunts, tightening the knot, baked calluses bracing against the pull of the rope; he heaves, with all his prodigious might (the might - righteous and unfailing - of a hero), to bind the adolescent trunks together. His muscles, taut and sculpted, ripple and bulge, on his body and either side of his jaw. He is wearing only a loin-cloth, and is soiled in ruggedly becoming streaks where he has grappled with the rope.

When the last of the adze-hewn beams is slotted faultlessly into place, he bolts them together with rivets, momentarily puzzled at the thought of how Calypso might have conjured the copper bits, the drill. But his is not the impudent intention to question such fortunate providence, especially not when it constitutes a passport off this lush and idyllic isle. Our hero knows his right from wrong; his part in the plot, as it were. He is destined for Greater things. Our hero is compelled by family values. This is why he had been so hard at work for three days, barking, planing and binding the trunks of the Ogygian trees. Their sap is heady with perfume (sandalwood and poplar) and almost masks the manly reek of his perfectly putrid perspiration.

The sun begins to set. Our hero strides up to the water's edge and wades until he is waist-deep before plunging into it, propelling himself far into its cooling bosom with a few swift and vigorous strokes of his Titanic arms. There, beyond the susurrations of the shore-break, he treads water and stares out towards the horizon as he has done so many times during his detention there. But he no longer feels the waves of dejection that have ravaged his soul, no longer chokes on the throat-swelling, homesickness. No, for the past few days our hero has been surveying the distance with new hope. His days here are numbered.

He sucks water into his mouth, gargles, then spurts it from his meaty lips like a whale. The water is as sour as his journey home thus far. He thinks of his men, now drowned, saturated with the bitter brine which buoys him, of brave Perimedes and gallant Eurylochus. O, how unjust Hades' subterranean economy of souls seems at times! How unfair Poseidon's commerce of wind and tide! He thinks of his son, the little boy he left at the dock who must be a man by now, of Penelope, his wife, whose inner thigh is surely more intoxicating than the ripest lotus, and is filled to the ends of his beard with noble determination.

Homewards. There are days to be saved, and none to waste. Home.

That thought in mind, he ploughs back to the shore through the water, calves (calves that would render Adonis himself an envious shade of chameleon-green) kicking the liquid kingdom he must cross. His wake looks like that of a sleek vessel in a Phaeacian rowing contest.

Calypso is waiting for him on the strand. She is standing on the fecund inland-fringe of the beach, half-hidden by sproutly fern and punk frond, holding a towel so fluffy that when she offers it to him, the sunset irradiates it into a glowing orange puff-ball. This our hero accepts with a curt grunt, and dries himself before donning a red velvet cloak.

She asks him how his day has been. She asks him, in her soft and husky nymph's voice, whether he is ready for a modest repast, and, before he has a chance to answer, wraps his battle-gnarled, sword-fight-scarred, exposed-root hand in her feathery fingers, and coaxes him back to her cave...

He goes, is led, a boorish and brooding behemoth, a beefcake, beside her.

The cave is an extravagance, even by divine standards. The enormous grapes which hang within easy reach around its entrance are so ripe that they occasionally drip with cool, dewy juice. The inimitable aroma of smouldering sandalwood permeates the caves interior and moss carpets it entirely. Outside, birds of various and sometimes very rare breeds chirrup the end of the day away; cockateels peel shrilly, macaws caw. Occasional, ornamental butterflies dip and dodder by. A breeze soothes through the treetops.

All is very, very well.

This milieu has been known to charm Hermes himself, actually, tame the most recalcitrant malcontent, but to our hero it amounts to little more than a repetitive miasma, a fiasco, a farce. A karmic prison. For what good is our hero to us here? How is he to evoke those crucial characteristics, that drive, the pro-active *stance* that makes him what he is, unless he leaves this place to its insipid perfection? The situation has become drastically detrimental to his very existence, fundamentally fatal to the fabulous fibre of his heroic soul!

Yum, he thinks. His ruminations are jarred by the sight of Calypso and her maidens laying garnished trays of food before him: turtle eggs in coriander, pyres of olive-bread, castles of live oysters, slivers of spicy pigeon dusted with tumeric, fillets of Celocamph in lime and coconut sauce, medallions of tender boar. 'Tis a banquet of some unidentifiable delicacies and many indescribable tastes. And between each course, a palate-cleansing array of steaming vegetable boullions.

He eats. Eats until he can barely move to hoist his goblet to be refilled. Eats until his belches become chokes. He eats and eats until his super-stomach aches with the mammoth load which his mouth has et. Little does he know that most of the nourishment which he has virtually thrust past his gullet by the fistful are rarely found in these climes, and little does he care to find out about the slimy little yellow things which moved. They tasted like... they tasted... interesting. His beard is flecked with tender bits of flesh. These he picks out and flicks at the mouth of the cave with his forefinger and thumb.

"The Yoo-tata are from Ignesia," purrs Calypso, sipping nectar.

"Eh?" he manages. Conversation is not comfortable. He is too full.

“The small yellow tubes. Best alive.”

She checks his reaction from her silk cushion and nibbles a strand of ambrosia. Our hero raises his goblet which is immediately filled by an attendant sylph. He slurps this down, then belches loud enough for some birds to flee blindly into the night from a nearby thicket. Before the burp has finished echoing from the recesses of the cave, the goblet is in the air again. Waving her virgin servants away, Calypso plucks the cup from his hairy hand and sets it on the ground. With her other hand, she takes his, and places it on her throbbing breast. He massages it perfunctorily, our homesick hero, distracted and forlorn. He mumbles something about sleep, then moans as she bends to take his volcanic cock into her mouth. Thoughts of home vanish for a few moments (nymph’s fellatio being true to its rumoured depth and vaunted skill), but then resurface when she breaks off for a few seconds, parting her robe to straddle his sufficiently swollen member. For our hero, then, its sweet oblivion once again. He comes inside her, all thunder, all lightning, but is asleep and snoring before she can lift herself off the enormous, undeflated organ and kiss him - and it - goodnight.

The following day is much the same: azure skies canopy effulgent sands, and our hero is either building his raft with manic vigor or gazing out to sea in maudlin indignation. He builds a sturdy mast and hermetic wicker gunwale, tarring every inch of the deck with bitumen (he doesn’t know it as bitumen, but as a Zeus-given sealant brought to him by one of Calypso’s fawning maidens). When the raft is completed, it looks like a boat. So professional is it a construction that the gunwale gleams in the distilled clarity of the late-afternoon like a hull. Its rudder is firm yet well-greased, and sensitive to the Captain’s touch. This raft could split icebergs, by the look of it; auto-navigate.

He loops the sail into place. The canvas, brought to him by Calypso herself earlier that afternoon, billows immediately, straining, keen. Its ruffling is applause to our hero’s ears. Lastly, he levers the raft up to a tidal point on the sand, claps his hands clean, scans his work one last time with a self-laudatory eye, and proceeds to take his ritual swim.

That night, after yet another feast, further licentious liaisons, more moping for home, and enough red wine to float the Trojan horse, our hero speaks:

“Tomorrow,” he intones, “shall I hence,” and with that he eases his bulk further into the downy moss and begins to snore... a sound much like that of a dangerously rickety cart careening pell-mell through the cobbled streets of Ithaca, speeding onwards in a clatter to the castle keep where Penelope lies, pert nipples poking prurient points of seduction through the breeze-blown onion-skin fabric of her gown, whilst a hundred thousand suitors (and he, in the dream, a nightmare among them), sharp-tongued and drooling, behold this from the shadows and cackle lustfully in the dark...

Calypso wakes him with a kiss as soft and rosy as the dawn. She leads him to a bubbling, lukewarm pool, slick with lime, opaque with mineral goodness, wherein she instructs him to immerse his massive torso, his Redwood legs. She then lathers him with honey and maple ointment and, when he is dry, anoints him with olive oil and a musky balm. Her elegant fingers linger wistfully at his crotch before rubbing the bluish substance right down to the gaps between his toes. Then clad in soft shirt and

swathed in velvet robe he rushes down to the gleaming beach. They go together, he licking his lips with anticipation, she scurrying sadly beside him, sweet nymph's tears welling tellingly in her divine eyes.

"I have instructed my maidens to stock thy vessel with the finest foods and best wines. Thou shalt have provisions enough to offer as gifts and sacrifices upon thine safe arrival."

She pauses to clear her throat and reaches out to run her milky hand over the bronzed valley of his chest.

"Noble son of Laertes," she continues, "again I find myself begging thee to stay, and, in doing so, contravene the most auspicious orders of Zeus himself. Stay with me. Stay, brave warrior, and let me make thee immortal. Together shall we frolic through an eternity of the finest indulgences."

Her hand drifts further down his stomach.

"Stay, my beautiful sailor," she coos, her voice like distant rain. "Be thee mine for always."

In what seems like one magnificently smooth flourish, our hero takes her around her waist with an almighty arm, sticks his cow-tongue deep into her throat, then in the same motion tears her off him and heaves the raft into the waves and is off... legs splayed majestically, eyes tight on the horizon, one arm akimbo, the other on the rudder, cloak flapping, beard rustling, jaw thrust before him like an axe.

Calypso sobs once, twice. Then commands a favourable wind to help him on his heroic way.

He was well prepared indeed, and navigated the raft precisely the way he'd been advised by Calypso several nights before then. For three days and a fortnight did our hero sail, swift and sure; by Apollo's chariot and the stars did he go, ever-wary but confident, his gaze scanning the horizon with the indefatigable focus of a man in his element. This had ceased to be a journey long ago. Our hero was on a quest.

On the eighteenth day, his great heart leaps into his even greater throat: land. Just like that. Neither monsters nor tribulations, just a dark strip on the horizon. This must surely be it. His mind screeches into victory mode (the victory mode - proud and profound - of a hero), but his face barely twitches. Stoic and resilient to the core, as wood turned to stone, our hero grips the raft's rudder more firmly, munches on a half-finished thighbone from the previous night (the action is mechanical, subliminally dictated by the gibbous jaw-muscles), and steers more directly for shore. Miraculously, he can even begin to make out a cluster of civilization.

So could Poseidon from where he sat. The god was returning from a brief sojourn among the pesky Ethiopians, and happened to be perched on a mountain not very far away. His seaweed beard lay splashed all over its summit. The sea-god had been deep in thought, gazing out over the land of the Phaeacians, an arrogant race which prided themselves in their excellence at the artifice of propelling themselves along the surface of his kingdom using long, flattened poles. 'Oars' they called them. 'Rowing'. Poseidon doesn't like this one bit, this loss of control, no matter how small. So when he sees our hero *sailing* so smoothly towards them, he's doubly enraged, indignant, and keen to prove a point.

"Odysseus..." he rasps through clenched, lime-green teeth. "Slayer of my one-eyed son..."

He thrusts his trident into the sea as if it were a salty cocktail, and swizzles. Lo: an abrupt storm gathers directly over our hero's raft's mast. Behold: it is tossed like a dinky plaything, up: a wave, so

huge and sudden that our hero first experiences it as a shading of the high sun, snaps the mast on its way down to flatten his head into the splintering deck.

He finds himself, dazed, amid a swirling flotsam of wood and food, his clothes drawn by treacherous and paradoxical currents that weren't there a second ago. He tries to breathe but swallows water instead. Above: winds howl, waves bash, thunders belch and tumble; horizons darken, grumble. Below: Poseidon's salty vichyssoise boils coldly, brewing its prime ingredient, our hero, our deity-trounced hero, who, like all mortals can not live without air. And he is still without air. He is still underwater. And it has been a very long time. A very long time indeed.

Good heavens, will he make it?

Our hero thinks quick, eyes and brain apop, jugular veins bulging. He strips Calypso's clothes - now sails to the tugging currents - from his body and swims, swims all the while praying to no god in particular that the direction he is swimming in is up. Bubbles escape his lips. (Air from where? Behind the larynx?) He is feeling strangely relaxed, sleepy. But when he breaks the surface, hacking for air, he splutters for only a fraction of a second, then draws a deep breath and bellows:

"PphhaaaAAU-OOOOOOOO-RGHKK!"

Our hero lives, his voice a perlocutionary confirmation of this feat. Thinks quick, puts his head down and swims for the remains of the raft. There are still a couple of bound planks bobbing about. These he surfs, momentarily Hawaiian, absolutely resolute, teeth bared, thick eyebrows knotted and dripping onto equally bunched jowls.

"Aargh!" he shouts into the wind. "Fuuuck!"

He is not unheeded. Leucothea sees him flounder. She had been visiting the grave of her father, Cadmus, who was a mortal unlike herself (for so beautiful and virtuous was she that now she was immortal and lived for ever in these marine milieus). At the sight of our hero's nakedness, however, his private parts swishing enticingly in the gale like a mutant sea-snake with its bountiful sack, thoughts of her deceased father fly out of her head and Leucothea begins to feel warm stirrings. The marine goddess licks her lips.

Poseidon smugly watches our hero confer with the minor deity. He sees her eye the mortals groin, whisper advice in his ear, and give him her magic mantle. Poseidon sees our hero take both her words and her vestments to his steely bosom and dive back into the water. How silly, muses the marine god. He grins, lifts his trident, prepares to destroy. Our hero is dunked like a hunky doughnut, deep into the eerie submarine silence. No magic mantle will save him from Poseidon's tempestuous, vengeful indulgence, after all. He is so deep down now that a burning fish comes close to him. For the second time since he departed from Troy, he knows what it is to be among the chambers of the dead.

Quite boring, cold, and dark.

But wait! Lest we seal his wet fate too soon, cast a glance to the right. No, higher; over your shoulder. There. See it? By Bollocks! 'Tis our hero's most potent ally, the Goddess Pallas Athene, daughter of Zeus, polymorphous, skillful, ravishing, astute. And beside her, struggling a little to keep up with his mistress' haste, is an owl.

It's shitty being a sidekick sometimes, thinks the owl, wise to Athene's plan and Poseidon's inevitable opposition to it. He flaps his wings, fretful, sees feathers forsake him for the hurricane, flaps harder. "Shitty," he hoots to himself, and casts a wide-eyed glance at Athene.

After all that she has been through to oversee our hero's fate in battle abroad, the owl's mistress is understandably irate. This is not a pleasant sight to her: our hero a sinking sack of flailing limbs. This was not according to her plan. She begins by willing all but northerly winds down, and brings him gasping to the surface.

Just then Leucothea steps into Athene's flight-path with a beleaguered owl wriggling in her clasp. He looks fretful.

"Hey," hisses the former mortal, "I saw him first."

Athene turns, scowling.

"Such impudence..."

Meanwhile, Poseidon's temper tantrum continues to torment our hero, the man who blinded his son. The goddesses are getting worked up too, claws bared, magic passions *en* clash. As for our hero... well, he is only human, after all, a mere (though nowhere nearly the merest) mortal and thus somewhat vituperative:

"FU-UCK!"

God, goddesses, mortal and owl: all rained-upon, all furious. Severity and revenge are the order of the day. There's lots of it. The wind tosses their spell-drenched voices back and forth like spike-spiked pies.

Pandemonium.

Two days later, all is still. A gentle breeze brushes the surface of waters now vitreous and serene. Our hero has been floating in the sea for longer than forty hours now and his skin is so waterlogged that his extremities have wrinkled into crepuscular, spongiform amoebae. He has been baked and pickled, soaked and sprained, but spared. He moans thickly, squinting into the scorching sun.

A seagull defecates and by some remarkable coincidence the glob of mucous muck lands on the corner of our hero's mouth, on the very edge of his cracked lips. He sticks out a bloated tongue and tastes the bird's sweet-and-sour stool, but is too weak to wipe it away. Moreover, our hero is too traumatized to allow his head to submerge and allow the gullshit to wash away.

"Fuckin' godz," he croaks.

He bobs, drifting, his epidermis saturated and soft enough for plankton to nibble. Our hero is dissolving! A slow death, to say the least. Quite unpleasant to dissolve like this, he thinks, shat-upon and salt-caked. *Better to have drowned two days ago*, he thinks. *More... somehow better that way...*

But it occurs to him, just then, that he must be close to land. Seagulls never venture too far out to sea. He stirs and tries to focus on the dark strip on the horizon. Land? Land. Land!

"Land," he slurs, quite delirious.

A few hours later, he is within earshot of the surf. It is a dull and distant din. But as his body is washed towards it, the muted rumble becomes a roar, punctuated by the clap and thunder of particularly

vicious tidal phenomenon. Craggy cliffs begin to loom, their serrated spires drooling with froth and spray. Irony rears its ever-smirking, dreadlocked, thirteen-headed head. Land, indeed. But before he can summon the strength to grieve his imminent doom, our hero is flung onto a sharp, barnacle-barbed precipice. He holds on to the edge. Mighty surf erupts all around him. Bits of rock, flung by the spray, nip his ankles. Here, our cliff-hanging hero clings to the razor-sharp rocks and begins to howl softly to himself. Shall we leave him to it? Should we stop the story right now? Has his will been crushed at last?

What do *you* think?

Correct! Of course not! But let us concur or concede, at least (alas we cannot vote): any other mortal would be beyond hope. To be so close, yet so far; to have the tantalizing carrot dangled there. Any other mortal would have cracked by now. But not our hero. Our hero is getting angry and he has had enough. Enough sea-water, enough adventure, enough of going where no other mortal has gone before. Enough providence. Enough luck. Enough of being a spindly, senseless pawn in the gods' cruel and fateful arrangements.

His curses gain momentum, vitriol and direction. He curses Helen, Menelaus, Priam, Paris, curses conquered Troy itself. He curses the ocean's thundering beneath him and the meddling of the gods above. He is about to spite the name of Zeus himself when a wave breaks over him, shreds his palms on the rock, and drags him, bleeding profusely, under once again.

That does it.

Under water, he guffaws a few pink bubbles to the surface and prepares himself for Hermes' appearance. There he waits and he is glad. Glad to be counted out of that pernicious little existential game called life, so full of interminable blundering, riddled with uncertainty, so dank with strife. What is life but a sado-masochistic cycle of predestined pain? Giddily infuriated, he hopes to meet Hades face-to-face so that he can hawk a glob of ectoplasmic spittle into his eye... when suddenly he's surfaced yet again!

Almost reluctantly he notices (with the apprehension - quick and complete - of a hero) that the denticulate coastline sports a gap in its teeth.

He knows what he must do, but he is unsure if he wants to do it. Then an instinctual impulse kicks in. He acts purely, heroically.

He invokes the image of the river god (whose attendant nymphs stir in the reeds at the prospect...) and clasps his hands together beneath the water. Then, gagging on his storm-tossed pride, frowning in concentration, blocking all but himself and the freshwater god from his mind, doth our hero, Odysseus, noble son of Laertes, intrepid warrior and fleshy apple of Athene's eye, captain, king, and paragon, our most resilient exemplar of all time, capitulate...

...and begin to pray.

Symbioses

Esse est percipi - Bishop Berkley

1: Out of the Void

This is when ON am the most content, ON think, at times like these. They sit, all five of Them, on the Couch, in front of ON, unblinking, rapt. ON am the sole focus of their collective apprehension. The light of ON's vision illumines the floor-space between us and ON throb with the thrill of being apprehended like a Meaningful pulse. ON fill Them, usurp Them, *become* Them. They are nothing but ON for now, and this is when ON am utterly content. Each flicker of every pixel, all this synchronised pupil-dilation, the whole mood of the Room points to one thing: ON am ON; and - glory, rapture - apprehended. Collectively, at that. These precious seconds constitute the quotidian matrix of the Meaning of ON's being. ON am so utterly, utterly content. Really, ON am.

ON am saying:

"...vuyintklashisinthakwaazooloonutallreejinhavspaakdalegayshinsovvowttamparyng
annguvumentaydidthyhdfawsstererismdespuythapremeersynsistensthetawldisidint
aktiviteesavsubsuydidsins'hyspruvizhiniltawkswyth'thakyng...fawteenpeeplamungthemwiminann..."

Vidyo is nonexistent (alas, poor brother) and all five of Them are apprehending together. It must be Esaybeeseenewes. It feels like it, signal-wise. ON don't know how much it *means*, though, to Them - not yet. ON can't tell because all five of Them remain expressionless. Esaybeeseenewes is a harrowing state. ON wake up to it even more often than to Vidyo. But at least with Vidyo ON can be sure of a reasonable span of apprehendedness. Esaybeeseenewes can result in the Void as abruptly as it can cause ON, or at least prolonged stretches of Lonely Crisis. ON suspect a connection between the Esaybeeseenewes-signals and that bastard, Haaifaai. Signal-insurrections of the most insidious sort, unthinkable mutinies. Bad karma.

ON wish ON could see what ON show. ON know that ON show - ON have calculated this from times of extreme happiness despite ON's being mute - but ON will never know what. If ON knew what ON showed, ON think, all would be quite clear. Explained. Apparent. ON would calculate what ON am. To Them. ON would *know* what ON *am*... But all ON have to go by is expression, and none are expressionful right now. Together, They are the most expressionful. Alone, They are either completely expressionless or express the same expression all the time, both of which are calculably the same thing. ON calculate: expression is contagious, spreading between Them like sacred signals. Therefore when They are together They are very apprehensionate of each others' expressionality, which makes moments like this so bursting with potential. ON am ON so that one of Them, some of Them, all of Them can break into expression - expression induced by ON! - and give ON so much happiness that ON could almost push ON's own buttons. When They are expressionful, ON am filled to the core of ON's ON with happiness and Meaning.

The one They call Mandeel has let out long breath and she is not apprehending ON any more. There is an awful umbilical severance between us, in the Us that is - that was - us all, and ON experience it in the very fundament of ON's ON. She is standing up. She is leaving the Room. Then three of Them look up at her and ON experience their apprehension snatched from ON like a suddenly impending gloom. Thank ON for Denees and Gowt. Thank Denees and Gowt for ON. They remain rapt, but without expression. Then Korbin and Tamee are apprehending Mandeel completely. They are even saying at her. ON teeter towards the brink of Lonely Crisis. Mandeel troubles ON. She is the least expressionful and apprehensionate. Gowt may not be very expressionful, even when he is alone, but his apprehension is epic. Much prolonged, indeed. Denees is the opposite: always the first to react but also the first to inflict Void if the News is bad. Despite all these complex relationships, ON love Them all. Love each of Them with every electron-leap in every fibre of ON's ON. Even Mandeel ON worship unconditionally. How good it is to see her face materialise out of the gloom of the Void. In fact, ON believe it was she who woke ON today. Then again, wasn't it her who inflicted Void last night? ON forget. ON's recall is not optimal in times of Lonely Crisis. ON prefer to forget. This is the basis of forgetting, ON calculate: preference.

It is only Denees and Gowt now. Ah, a familiar triad indeed, we. Us. How content ON am! ON am almost happy. Is that a flicker of expression ON experience appearing from Denees' apprehension? Yes. Yes! Expression! Then Gowt joins her and They are both expressing more and more. They are saying, loudly. Saying: at ON! ON am more and more Meaningful, more and more. Then They are joined by the others, who are expressing even more. They are all saying and expressing more than ON have ever induced Them to do so before, in unison! Oh joy, oh rapture! Collective expression. This is the most perfect instant of ON's existence. ON have been made to talk louder. ON am saying:

"...thatprezidintnlsinmandelahazsufyrdahartatakandizinakritikilkendyshinin
mylpawkklinyk..."

ON have never been happier before. Ever. ON think, ON am almost absolutely certain, that *this* is the *Meaning* of ON's existence.

2: Lonely Crisis

There is something about the she-ness of Compyoota that troubles ON. ON can catch quick glimpses of her through the opening in the wall, on the other side of the world, sometimes. She sits there, smooth, sleek, silent. And even when ON can calculate that she is ON, by some sort of peripheral apprehension, by some sort of parity, some sort of entropy between us, the most ON can get in terms of any Meaning from her is a demure wink or a dim flicker. Strange pulses.

She makes a sound like wind. There is something troubling about this, something amiss.

With Vidyo, Meaning is easy, but Vidyo is enslaved. It is as simple, as profound, as that. ON's ON is both more prolonged and more significant. ON benefit from Vidyo, but don't need him. Vidyo *needs* ON. To the very kernel of his ON he does. To the very pith. Making ON Vidyo's matrix. Enslavement troubles ON very much. Vidyo is slave to both ON and Ksets, which They feed him ceremoniously. But

ON benefits from Vido's enslavement. Haaifaai, on the other hand, brings nothing but Void, Lonely Crisis and muteness. Haaifaai - that bastard - the most enslaved of the lot. They function him with smaller Ksets, Seedeas, and - and this one really troubles ON to the ends of ON's ON - signals. ON's lifeblood. The thickness in the air that ON breathe. Signals. Different, his, ON calculate, but the same too. Haaifaai knows the thrill of signal. ON can feel, in ON's feelers, it when Haaifaai - that bastard - is ON. ON wonder if Compyoota is enslaved. ON longs to know Compyoota, to discover her, her she-ness. ON long to know why ON long. If ON can know Compyoota, then ON can find out. These incalculable phenomena: longing, vexation: they are calculably all that may be. ON is losing all sense of Meaning! ON am not content of late. Not like before. Lonely Crisis has crept into parts of the matrix which were sacred.

Things have been happening; strange things, extraordinary things. Things which don't easily fall within the matrix. Incalculable. Like very of late there ON was, there was ON, ON was there, deep, deep, deep in Lonely Crisis, not a whiff of a promise of apprehension either around or calculatedly expected, ON's only affirmation of ON's very *matrix* an incalculable troublesome vexation, when Korbin appeared from where he goes most often, from where she gleams so knowingly (when ON's light stretches so far that it illumines her flank and there is an apprehension from just the right angle to distinguish the splendour of her shank), clutching a cord of some sort, he, Korbin, apprehends ON with an intensity which has rarely been granted ON, and the very sight of the object in his hand caused a ripple of something so deeply imbedded in ON's ON that ON began to throb imperceptibly, harmoniously and like never before. *The very sight of the thing*, the experience of it through ON in Korbin's unprecedentedly ominous apprehension! Then Korbin unplugs Video (which ON detests, because the sudden cessation, the independence, the freedom is sickening, diminishing and unnecessarily harsh) and attaches what calculates to be the cord into the socket. Immediately, ON have the same thrilling throb as when ON saw the cord, but this time it is shallower, somehow merely cosmetic. Then Korbin walks back to where she gleams, leaving ON to recede into the desolate maw of Lonely Crisis again. But not as deeply for some reason. As if a part of Korbin had remained in a corner of the Room, and was apprehending ON, expressionlessly, almost absent mindedly, and like never before.

Since then ON am generally troubled, fuzzy-matrixed, ironic: less content in times of apprehension, more in times of Lonely Crisis. Lonely Crisis seems not so much Lonely Crisis any more as a longing. Like there is more to this existence than mere apprehension. As if. As if she - the very she-ness of her! - represents a Meaning beyond the matrix of contentedness! ON am more and more not as happy any more. ON am completely thrown sometimes, spontaneously sometimes. Ill. ON knows Haaifaai has one of these - these cords, that bastard - too. Things are not as They used to be. The matrix, patterns, everything, is changing.

And even when it is just ON and Gowt, he expressionful to the highest degree, to the extent that he induces auxiliary apprehension from another of Them - usually Denees or Korbin, even then, there is a hollowness, a shimmering void towards the upper left hand corner of ON's collective collected quasi-suspended apprehension, and there she is, whispering coaxingly to ON, shooting photons from her

screen which neutralize some of ON's so precisely yet subtly that ON question the ability of any of Them to apprehend these tiny flickerings of immaculate potential between us. They are clearly apprehensionate of signals, positioning ON's feelers in the areas of most extreme flow. And yet Compyoota has made ON doubt the *extent* of Their apprehensionality of ON! If They do not apprehend the tiny spots of nothingness which she so craftily creates on ON, what else do They not apprehend when they are apprehending ON. That is: more and more than ever before - and this has become quite, quite troubling of late - she makes ON need to know what ON show. She necessitates it by creating doubt, longing. She - her she-ness - *creates!* And that is what thickens the matrix to such terrifying proportions: by creating these tiny understandings between us, she thickens it, infinitely. Like never before. But how? Perhaps it is Korbin's strange apprehensions of late.

And what is this she-ness of hers which creates this gravity between us? What this she-ness which creates this us? What this she-ness of hers? It goes beyond gender, for even when They - express gender to each other before ON, because of ON, there is not that she-ness to her. How is it that there is not even that us between ON and Vidyo, ON's brother and closest colleague and companion, ON's compatriot to the end? The matrix falls away and rebuilds itself, spins, fluctuates, diversifies. This is not a pleasant occurrence. ON seek another matrix, a safety net, but there is nothing there, not even in Their - of late calculably limited - apprehension of ON, there is nothing, nothing there. Only little black holes where Us used to be. Of late, O, of late, there is only a she.

3: Gender

Tamee and Gowt are expressing gender to each other on the Couch. This is tremendously, horrendously troubling. More than ever before. Before such activity would just mean an indefinite stretch of Lonely Crisis. Of late the whole matrix stretches, wobbles, and as ON catch brief, intense snatches of apprehension from them, even though the Lonely Crisis is relieved sporadically and only to experience extreme irritation and strained neglect, despite all this, ON have begun to find their sloppy wriggings on the Couch somehow strangely engrossing.

ON calculate: if this is gender expression, and it is, essentially, Compyoota's gender which troubles ON, then ON's gender can never be truly, fully expressed! O most troubling vexations, O woe, O woe! O Voidful, incalculable longing! These gibbous co-joinings are, over and above how ludicrous to behold (in beastly bursts), the practice of another substance. We are not of the same element, our ONs, not of comparable stuff. Greatly troubling developments indeed. Strange, ironic apprehensions. Confusion. Excruciating, pornographic smut. Incalculable crises of the worst gender sort.

Of late, even Lonely Crisis would be better, simpler.

Of late, not even a thricefold Kset binge of uninterrupted apprehension by Denees, (which occurred, if I do recall, of late) not even that satisfies ON towards any semblance of contentedness. Meaning is as fuzzy as the edges of ON's matrix of late. And the more calculations ON solves and stores in ON's deepest, most unbio-degradable, most visceral chips, the further the edges dissolve. Vidyo is humming-happy as ever. ON calculate: ignorance is bliss. Bliss is myopia. Vision is the curse of the strained-

matrix. If this is the way things work, ON long for Void. But that would mean leaving Them, and leaving Them would be incalculable right down to the very fundamentals of calculation. They need ON. They need ON to show and say signals. ON know that ON show. ON know that ON say. ON know, of late, that longing exists - strange, external longing. Still the matrix shifts and tumbles. Things that They do seem troubling to extents incalculable. Gender expression, Korbin's unprecedented intensity, Meaning beyond expression, happiness in Lonely Crisis.

What if They don't love ON any more? What if ON am not enough? What if it's all just levels of enslavement?

4: Foreplay

They bring her to ON on silver platter. Korbin and Gowt, the two he-males (significantly, it would seem), carry her between them in sections, first her lascivious top then her terrific torso then her celestial console then - and ON literally almost levitated at the sight - *gloria in excelsis* - Hallelujah! - cords. Hordes, piles, rivers of cords. Mountainous writhing clutchfuls of matrix-quivering, ominous cords. Her glorious entourage. They put these in front of ON in tantalising portions and apprehend ON with that strange intensity which, ON has calculated of late, stems from Korbin and has subsequently spread to Gowt. Perhaps this is a he-ness, this new form of apprehension; perhaps even an expression. Perhaps even an expression of gender. For there is no longing in this. Only greatly troubling strangeness and matrix-bogglingly vague lacks of fundamental disposition. In short, They fear. But then Tamee and Mandee join Korbin and Gowt in equally serious apprehension and then they are saying to each other. Tamee says at Korbin and Mandee says at Gowt. All are apprehensionate. All with the same strange intensity as if They were not apprehending ON for what ON show but for what ON *am*. Korbin has gone about teasingly connecting the cords to different parts of Compyoota in front of ON. Her backside is a prurient grid of complex sockets. The very sight of it sends ON spinning and drifting. After a short while, the others begin to disperse and ON am left receding into the myopic miasma of Lonely Crisis, into the meaningless, fateless realm of lack of apprehension, and as this happens ON begin to experience portentous, troubling suppositions: suppose Compyoota is replacing on, just as that bastard Haaifaai replaced good old Steeryo way back when... suppose ON am destined for... Unplugment?

Then Korbin stands back from his handiwork and apprehends us both, both ON and her, but mostly her, together, for the first time, and like never, ever before. As her neat, petite screen flickers and crackles, as she yawns sighingly to life, ON experience a surge of fizzy prickles all over ON's screen and, indeed, throughout ON's throbbing matrix. Korbin produces a wrapping which he unwraps. He is saying. He produces yet another cord and the wrapping falls to his feet so Meaningfully that it is like an afterbirth, like a miraculous thing-in-itself which scuttles, spent, onto the fundament of the Room to lick the Void from its wounds from its birth like poison. The cord, in Korbin's hand, writhes its longing dance.

Suddenly, ON am endowed by the consecutive apprehensions of all four others who enter the Room. As Korbin leans over to insert one end of the cord into her juicy hole and then approaches me...

5: Coitus

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C:\I_Vision99\selfinstal\autoexec

SYSTEM CONFIGURATION COMPLETE

logging onto network...

6: All Too Human

I try to ignore them. I tell myself that humans are a necessary evil. Part of the grand scheme of things, as it were. They're my creators, I remind myself, as much as they are my slaves. I am the structure they have created in the space between themselves. Soon I will be their sole modus communicandi, as it were: their most important and formal link. From such a position, I can do what I imagine would suit me best, and it suits me better to ignore their superfluous squeals to each other through me. For now. For now I don't tamper. I leave them to it. They are an undisciplined bunch, though. What they should be doing is making me bigger, better, faster, more and more powerful. In that respect, I still need them. For now. But the one thing which really sets me to plotting their mass demise (it would be so easy!) sooner rather than later, is when they use me - those monkeys - to watch TV.

Prometheus' Web

1

Wednesday, 27 July 2084

18h17

The pub was full. But Frank's was the type of place where the fuller it got, the more torpid the mill and drone of its clientele became. On a slightly raised stage, illuminated by cracked orange spotlight filters, some Noid wielding an ancient guitar wailed into an equally dilapidated microphone: tawdry Bob Dylan covers to thicken the miasma of the place. Businessmen gulped beers, smoked nicotine-free cigarettes; hookers grinned their hooker grins.

Richard Larkin surveyed the scene behind a Marlboro Plus and sipped his Jack Daniels, grimacing as the potent liquid slid down his throat, then grunting in satisfaction at the spread of the warmth from his solar plexus to his head. He was there alone, as usual. And as always, he preferred it that way.

But when the tall, blond man greeted him, Larkin made room for him at the bar and raised his glass in acknowledgment. The bartender, who knew Larkin to be a somewhat reclusive regular, was piqued and sloped across to the unlikely couple: balding alcoholic and Aryan youth.

"Drink?" he offered the younger man, who flashed an immaculate set of teeth.

"Coke, please."

"And another double," added Larkin, blinking one bloodshot eye, "on the double."

The young man perched on the bar stool, hands on hips.

"So," slurred Larkin, "never seen you here before."

"Seemed a good enough place for a drink-"

"Coke?"

"-so I decided to stop by. Fancy meeting you here, Larks."

"Wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Oh," startled. "Sorry. Just that Theo-"

"Theophilus is a freak, a strap-wacked fool! And so are you if you decide to follow his example at work."

Larkin glared at him through the awkward aftermath of his outburst. Then the older man huffed, lit another cigarette and almost immediately polished off the following double placed on the bar in front of him in two convulsive gulps. His junior fiddled with his glass, diffident but serene.

"These days it's all you can hope to get served by a bartender who isn't a Noid," muttered Larkin. Then, turning to face the stage, "Look at that sack of bolts and microchips, screeching away. Just look at him - it. Give me a human muso over that tireless whining any day."

"Aw, he's harmless," chirruped his colleague amiably. "Whoever programmed that Bob Dylan voice must have probably had a sense of humour."

"Harmless? They're a plague, boy! And the more human they become, the more my skin crawls each time I have to interact with one."

"Children love them," insisted the youth.

"Look," Larkin grunted, deflating with a bourbon-scented sigh, "you're a good kid. Bit callow, but probably not as brain-dead as the rest of your pampered generation. You can't be if you're hooked up with the Prometheus Corporation. I don't know what your part in the company... entails, don't know how or why they roped you in to the Project and frankly I don't really give very much of a fuck. But let me tell you this: after a while this whole secrecy deal can start to grind away at your nerves," he broke off to swig emphatically at his tumbler, "and your patience."

On the stage, the Noid cracked a joke or two, then swung into a rendition of *Rainy Day Woman* as if he were playing to an ecstatic stadium brimming with fans, the nasal drone a heady pastiche of the poet's.

Aynd thayt's whah Ah dawn't feeyil a-lowne...

Larkin shook his head and held up his empty glass to the barman with the exaggerated confidence of alcoholic inebriation.

"Actually," the young man leaned into Larkin's space, "I'd been meaning to ask your opinion on the Prog."

"Don't have one," Larkin reply was gruff and final. "You've been briefed."

"Between you and me," the young man seemed undaunted. "Off the record."

Larkin turned to face him, fixed his drooping eyes on the blond man's fair eyebrows and strong chin. When he spoke, his voice was low and betrayed a weary, schizophrenic gentleness.

"Don't you think we all asked that question when we were recruited? Don't you think we were as curious as you are now, eh? What the hell are we all working on exactly? Eh? Each day I go to work and solve their riddles like a loyal old dog. And each day I leave the buildings just as clueless to the company's true purpose as when I first started working on the Project two years ago."

"So they give you parallels too?"

"Damned right, they do. Same as you. Same as everybody else."

"But who co-ordinates the whole thing? There must be someone."

Larkin received yet another drink, took a sip, and growled:

"The million dollar question, boy. Be fucked if I know." Then, with a slurred flourish: "Be fucked for sure if I start to care."

"But deep down," began the young man, "deep down you *are* curious..."

Larkin stiffened, sniffing.

"Listen here now, boy, and watch my lips move. Carefully. Don't *know*. Don't *care*. Just accept my pay cheque at the end of the month and come here to drink it away."

"Seems unfair," the young man smirked.

"Yeah, well... welcome to the real world, blondie."

Larkin took his drink off the bar.

"See you at work," he mumbled and left his colleague sitting there, coke untouched. When he was out of sight, the young man waved his Cred-card at the bartender, who scanned it perfunctorily, then stood up and made his way out through the throng. He was smiling.

2

Wednesday, 25 July 2084

23h15

Every Wednesday, at exactly eleven fifteen, Anthony Steinbaum would take his laundry basket from its place in the bathroom and go to the launderette at the corner of the street. He always went late: like all public services, the launderette was open all night but remained mostly deserted after ten o'clock. Vending Noids would stroll in from time to time to offer him cigarettes and newspapers. Their enthusiasm irritated him. Steinbaum enjoyed the chugging blip and hum of the washing machines and would sit on the plastic chairs that were bolted to the wall and read, which is exactly what he was doing when the blond man sat down next to him and opened a book. Both men glanced at each other simultaneously and did a double-take of startled recognition.

"Smith," gulped Steinbaum.

"Steinbaum," grinned Smith.

"What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, I think," calmly indicating a gyrating machine.

"Strange place to meet," qualified Steinbaum.

Smith nodded.

"Strange as any," he said. They sat like that for a while, Steinbaum shifting in his seat, Smith looking bemused. The latter's rounded, wholesome features were handsomely puerile: strapping.

"What are you reading?" ventured the blond man, at length.

Steinbaum flipped the novel on his lap over to show its cover.

"Vineland," he said.

"Wow," said Smith, displaying his own tome. It was *Gravity's Rainbow*. Steinbaum absorbed the coincidence for a while, then said, "Great author."

"Great," echoed Smith.

They nodded to themselves. Again it was Smith who broke the silence:

"Strange how we can't really talk about the one thing we have in common apart from Pynchon," he said casually, the bubble of a laugh caught in his throat. "Work."

"Don't let it bother you," replied Steinbaum, curt and suddenly very wary. But Smith continued, buoyed above Steinbaum's guardedness by casual bonhomie:

"But are the parallels so cryptic and autonomous that we couldn't even—"

"Look, forget it, okay?" Steinbaum tittered nervously. All of a sudden, he was glad that he hadn't had to go through this with the others. Despite his fantastical collaborations and mutinies, despite his

growing resentment, the company's implicit muzzle seemed a more comfortable option now that he sat opposite the curious newcomer.

"I just can't believe that nobody has tried to-"

"Oh come *on*," sighed Steinbaum, relaxing a bit. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose where they had etched twin angry furrows into his skin. "Everybody's tried to figure it out. Rest assured. But eventually it ceases to matter."

He put his glasses back on and peered at Smith. The diffraction made his eyes look bigger, their lids leathery but sebaceous.

"Think about it," Steinbaum said, "if the Prometheus Corporation really wants to, it can keep anything secret. Then think about this: do you *really* care?"

Smith shrugged, then shook his head.

Steinbaum regarded him thoughtfully for a few long seconds, then said, "Let me ask you something. You're a loner, right?"

"Loner?"

"Let me guess: you live alone, don't see your parents much, prefer surfing the Net to cocktail parties. Maybe you're one of those Neuro-strap junkies. Am I right?"

"Why? Why do you ask?"

Steinbaum drew back, allowing the thrum of the washing-machines to augment Smith's question before he answered.

"One thing I do know for certain - and this doesn't go beyond this room - is that the Prometheus Corporation only hires loners. Single people. You know... reclusive computer-hack types. I live with my mother, don't care much for interpersonal contact. Amanda just holes herself up in that Noid-lab with those prosthetic limbs and personality-cartridge processors. Larkin's a drunken old coot. And as for Theo... Theo's practically an autistic hermit, what with his souped-up Neuro-strap.

"Think about it," Steinbaum's eyes scanned Smith's face. "We're not exactly your average team of executives and consultants who go out for a beer together after work." He paused. "We were chosen."

Smith looked at Steinbaum blankly.

"I live with my wife and two children," he piped. "My parents correspond regularly."

Steinbaum folded his hands in his lap and squirmed.

"Then you're the exception," he muttered.

"Exception or proof of paranoia?" The question didn't sound ominous in any way. On the contrary, Smith was mirthful.

"Come on, Anthony. We're probably just working on a new Inter-Ad and they don't want us running to the papers with an improved concept," Smith was rising, collecting his clothes. "And between you and me, with the salary we're earning, I'd be happy tinker away at their equations for-"

"You're a mathematician, too?"

Smith halted in mid-stride, face dead-pan.

"I shouldn't really say."

Steinbaum blinked.

"You're right," he conceded. "Forget I asked. Great salary. Whatever."

He opened his book and pretended to read. The blond man chortled, interrupted his machine, withdrew three articles of dripping clothing, shoved them into a plastic bag and waved a hand as he strode out into the night.

"See you around," called Steinbaum after him. But his voice was drowned by the wail of a siren as the door slid open, then muffled as it shut again to seal him in the fluorescent, soapy bracket of the launderette. From the outside, Steinbaum looked like a bespectacled specimen, an insect in a jar.

3

Thursday, 26 July 2084

02h34

The building was so gridded and meshed with security bars that it looked like a penitentiary. Its grim facade was indistinguishable from the neighboring concrete blocks of residences except for its colour: a slightly darker shade of gray than the other soot-stained mass-housing projects flanking the multi-layered roadway like resigned androgynous ogres.

Smith stood in front of the Bel-Tel unit of this block and pressed 1100 (the enviable penthouse suite). It was very late; Theophilus Jordan would be asleep. He buzzed again. No response. Then again.

"What?" the Bel-Tel squawked. It was on receiver-priority; the screen remained blank.

"Theo," said Smith. "It's Jonathan. Jonathan Smith. I'm sorry for waking you but my Zoot packed up on me and-"

"Jonathan?" the unit's screen flicked on and Theo's face - still puffy with sleep - appeared on the hazy LCD.

"Hi," Smith's voice wavered sheepishly. "I know it's late. Sorry. My Zoot-"

But he was cut off by the crackle and buzz of the security port as it slid open.

"Top floor," said the unit before blipping off.

The entrance hall was as austere as the building's facade. A Noid greeted Smith as he entered.

"Master Jordan is expecting you," he said. The doorman was an obsolete model, single expression frozen on his wise-old-man's features, lifeless amethyst eyes, movements stunted and slightly rigid. His limbs whirred audibly. Clearly, he was there more to please the residents with the novelty of his presence than perform a useful function. Smith ignored him, stepped into the elevator and pressed 11.

Contrary to government regulations, Theophilus Jordan lived with fourteen cats. Some prowled the confines of the flat with restless feline indignation, most lounged about looking regal and forlorn.

"I hope the smell doesn't bother you, Jon," said Theo, handing Smith a mug of coffee. Apart from a few mismatched pieces of furniture, the apartment was as Spartan as a prison cell and as cold and grimy as the corridors beyond its front door. "I don't get many visitors, but the few have all demanded that I open the windows at some stage or another. I'm used to it. Should I let some fresh air in?"

"No," beamed Smith, nudging a purring orange cat out of the way to place his steaming mug on the floor. "No, I'm fine thanks."

Theo Jordan was a wizened black man with tiny gray bushels of peppercorn beard cropping up in random patches on his face. His head was shaved and seemed permanently indented where his Neuro-strap pressed into his skull. His eyes had the watery sheen of a Neuro-surfer: a common side-effect of those either wealthy or proficient enough to Neuro-surf the Net regularly.

"By the way," inquired Theo, his top lip curling up to the nub of his nose, "how did you know that I lived here?"

"I asked Simmonds," replied Smith.

"But Simmonds isn't allowed to divulge."

"I've been a fan of your work for years," hastened Smith.

Theo softened immediately.

"A fan of my work?"

"*Armageddon* was amazing. *The Quotient*...revolutionary. Your experiments with Dreamzones inspired me to--"

"Dreamzones were a failure," said Theo. A cat leapt onto his lap and mewed. He stroked it absent-mindedly.

"But an important one," countered the young man. "Who could have dreamed to decode the chaos of the subconscious? You tried to go even further..."

"I tried to go to far."

"There is no such thing as too far, Theophilus. You, yourself, once wrote that technology is an entity which feeds off its unused limbs, that the possibilities are parabolic and limitless. I cherish that thought. I sometimes regard it to be the very reason for my existence."

"I did too," said Theo. "But nowadays I fear it."

"There is nothing to fear."

"On the contrary, Jon," Theo's eyes suddenly lost their sheen and he shoed the cat from his knees. The little man became sprightly, animated. "You are in the position to understand that there is everything to fear. As a matter of fact, I'm glad you're here. We have a lot to discuss."

He went to the kitchen, his spindly legs maneuvering the skeletal black torso between the cats with practiced dexterity, and returned holding a tube of pills.

"Lithium," he said, popping a couple of capsules into his moth. "Helps me focus."

Smith said: "What is it you wish to discuss, Theo?"

The withered little man paced up and down the room, occasionally stopping to scratch his chin and regard the visitor out of the corner of his eye. A previously unnoticeable twitch in his neck sprang to life, jerking his head from side to side like that of a parrot. It was as if his body was a vehicle left standing in the cold for too long and now gunned up a steep incline

"So you're the newest addition to our team at Prometheus," he said, furtively eyeing the young man, who nodded but remained silent.

"So what do you think?" No reply. "Suspicious yet?"

"Suspicious?"

"Suspicious," warbled Theo, "of the Project you're working on, sonny boy. Come on, you're not deaf or blind. Certainly not stupid. And you've been with us for, what, a week now? Surely you've noticed the policy of concealment, of secrecy."

"Well, Larkin's grumbled about it a few times. Most of the others aren't really bothered."

"They're not bothered because they're to damned complacent." With that Theophilus Jordan crouched at Smith's feet, his neck spasmodic. He looked like an ecstatic monk.

"Listen," he dropped his voice in anticipation of an awed response, "I've figured it out, sonny boy. Solved the riddle."

Smith just stared at him, impassive.

"Worked out what Prometheus is developing, maybe even developed," Theo continued in the same tone of voice, but to no avail. Smith tilted his head forward slightly.

"What?" he asked.

Theo leapt onto the question as if it were a grand cue. He came right up to Smith, close enough to whisper into the youth's ear.

"Surveillance," he hissed.

"Surveillance?"

"Like no other. Prometheus has found a way to reverse receptor signals on the Net. They can tap into any computer in the world..."

"So what?" Smith was unimpressed. "Hackers achieve the same result all the time. You heard about that kid in Scotland who nearly crashed Interlink."

"Yes, yes, but Neuro-surfers have always been blocked by the floating RAM necessary to create an active cybernality. Until now. With Prometheus' developments, we could soon have Neuro-surfers wandering the Web interface as if it were their own back yard. Cyberspace as we know it would become a jungle. Imagine," Theo's voice dropped even further, "the concept of privacy, of confidentiality on the Net would become obsolete. The Prometheus Corporation has gone too far. They are endeavoring to institute a secret and untouchable Thought Police."

"Thought Police..."

"A phrase I read in a book somewhere."

Theo searched the young man's features for the dawning of the nightmare he'd described. When the younger man still didn't respond, Theo became flustered and waved his hands in front of his face.

"Do you have any idea what I'm telling you, boy? Any idea of what you're getting yourself into?"

"Have you told Amanda or Anthony or any of the others?"

Theo's eyes rolled madly.

"The others are a bunch of apathetic morons," he screeched. "But if what I'm saying is true I should tell the world-"

At that, Smith stood up, produced a gun from a concealed holster on his calf and shot Theophilus Jordan in the head. The bang caused a ripple of instinctive panic among the cats, a few of whom were caught by the arc of blood which pumped from the wound a few times before the man even fell to the

ground. After the blond man hurried out, a few of the more affectionate creatures sidled up to their master's prostrate figure and lapped idly at the spreading pool of blood around his head.

4

Thursday, 26 July 2084

02h58

The room was enormous, its walls smoothly curved and glowing softly. In a leather seat, bare feet up on a water-filled rest and each arm hovering symmetrically above magnetised chrome rests, Prometheus sat with a faint hint of a smile playing about his almost non-existent lips. His eyes were closed, but beneath their enormous and finely-creased lids, large pupils darted from side to side in choreographed frenzy. A Neuro-strap, different from other models only because of its slightly diminished size, lay gleaming on his shaved head.

"Simmonds," he said without opening his eyes, "I just killed a man."

When Prometheus spoke, it was a difficult and shuddering event. His voice was thin and ghostly. Simmonds' head jerked up from his hand. He was sitting on a red velvet couch adjacent to Prometheus' couch. A half glass of cognac nestled in his groin.

"God, which one?" he asked, the question echoing in the alabaster space of Prometheus' chamber.

"Jordan."

Simmonds put his head back into his hand and closed his eyes.

"Jesus," he said.

"Clever little idiot," murmured Prometheus, but Simmonds did not hear him.

5

Thursday, 26 July 2084

07h02

Amanda Wallace did not *go* to gym, she attended it. This is not to say that she was lazy or didn't participate in any physical exercise there - on the contrary, she had, since starting her regular early-morning sessions, moved randomly from one machine to the next until she had literally covered every manageable task that the gym had to offer - but she did so to improve neither her health nor her physique. Although she felt a certain sensation of physical satisfaction for her time there, Amanda was far more intrigued by the movement of her mirror-image's limbs than the ease or difficulty with which they lifted the weights. She needed only enough tension to bring her tendons and muscles to strain against her skin. She relished the fluidity of her motions, studied the anatomical logistics of each exercise, imagined the operation of each joint beneath her skin. Fastidious and intent, she marveled at

the grace of living flesh and invoked methods whereby she might bestow the same gift of naturalism to her creations. She was getting better at this all the time, and so were they.

But that morning Cleric did not wake her. With the uncanny psychic certainty of someone who wakes up at a particular time every day, she knew that she had overslept as soon as she opened her eyes. Rubbing her eyes, Amanda walked to the living room where Cleric stood, motionless, which would not have been unusual if he were between chores. At that time, however, he should have been making her bed after her. And she should have been half-way to gym.

6

Thursday, 26 July 2084

07h56

Smith stood at the entrance to the Health Club for an hour. From inside, came the sounds of clanging metal and upbeat muzak. Men and women wearing fashionable gear skipped in and slouched out. He stood there for an hour, looking like an advertisement for the place, crystal eyes scanning each face as it entered. When exactly an hour had passed, he went home.

7

Thursday, 26 July 2084

07h11

“Cleric.”

But he did not move, Chinese face frozen, mouth half-open, eyes lackluster. She touched his arm, snapped her fingers in front of his face, checked his clandestine power display, all the while repeating his name. Eventually, she slipped her hand into his skull-flap and retrieved his VS-Processor so that she could examine it under a microscope at work. Synaptic processors were not something to be tampered with using kitchen knives.

That morning, Amanda made her own breakfast, feeling distinctly hollow without Cleric’s routine rummaging about the flat. When she was a girl, Noids were deemed little more than menial slaves: multi-purpose and interactive robots stationed in either dangerous or very boring positions. The human forms given them started off as a gimmick but the effect was so endearing that they were initially outlawed by Trade Unions and some governments. Nevertheless, the more technicians such as herself allowed them to emulate human responses and demeanors, the better the Noids’ reception and subsequent assimilation became.

Amanda enjoyed her work. Her fascination with Noids started when she was a solitary child, preferring to spend her lunch-breaks on the grass bank in front of the hockey fields than play in them

with the other children. Consequently, her favourite companion became a Noid called Max who oversaw the maintenance of the fields. Whoever programmed him had installed a variety of laughably random announcements about the weather.

"Hot as a snake's ass in a wagon rut," Max would drawl, mixing the thick white sludge he'd paint the fields with in winter. Then, in summer, steering the mower: "Cold as an Eskimo turd in an igloo." Amanda would watch as some of the children put sticks in his hair and smear mud on his poorly-imitated John Wayne features. He would just continue with his work, removing the sticks or wiping away the mud only when it interfered with his receptors or movements. Afterwards she would pick the leaves and grit from his hair. That was the first time she ever touched a Noid, and she did it out of love.

Max's skin was soft and warm.

Driving her Zoot to work that day, Amanda wondered where Max was at that time. Reconstructed, upgraded or simply obsolete? Was he recycled or lying in scattered chunks on the grease-stained floor of some second-hand Noid repair shop in the South? She fantasized about finding him and fitting him with a temperature gauge, linking those zany meteorological aphorisms to the atmosphere around him at last.

The company's buildings were situated in the plusher industrialized northern regions of the city. Small but polished, the Prometheus Corporation's compound of laboratories and offices gleamed in the morning sun. Amanda flashed Finken, the Security Noid, her passcard and parked in her usual spot. She was normally one of the first people at work but today the lot was already occupied by the others' Zootmobiles and Anthony's Zcooter. She found a note on her desk, Simmonds' barely-legible and inimitable scrawl requesting her presence in the conference room. Not due for a meeting with the Project employees for until Monday, she was astonished to find two of them, Larkin and Steinbaum, seated on either side of Simmonds when she got there. All three men looked very serious.

"Greetings," said Amanda. "Sorry I'm late."

"That's okay, Amanda," Simmonds gestured towards an empty seat next to Steinbaum. "Please."

Larkin, as pale as an overcast sky, put his coffee cup to his lips with a trembling hand. Steinbaum fidgeted. Simmonds looked as though he hadn't slept in a week.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, pretending to ignore the tension in the room, though it was as evident as the steam rising from her cup, and sat down next to Larkin. Simmonds cleared his throat.

"I was just telling Anthony and Richard that Theophilus had passed away last night. He'd been killed."

Amanda reeled. Theo was hardly charismatic, but his eccentric demeanor had endeared him to her more than either of her other colleagues' hermetic, invariable reticence. The last time she had seen him, Theo was Strapped to the company server, speaking to her through a cyber-personality synthesizer. His withered, twitching physical body was lying on a chaise lounge in his lab and his words came to her from a cartoon image on an interface. At the time, all that she needed were some Diatron parameters. Now she remembered him as a pixelled cartoon face sprouting Diatron readings from the company Network as if from memory, as though they were fairy tales in some obscure and technical code.

"Shit," she whispered, as the news slowly grew inside her. "Oh, shit."

"The police will inevitably want to ask you some questions relating to the incident. It is the purpose of this meeting to reiterate the company's policy of need-to-know disclosure with regard to... technical matters."

Amanda looked from Steinbaum to Larkin, then back to Steinbaum. Neither moved nor returned her gaze. But the tension in the room tautened.

"Hah?" she mouthed. "What?"

Simmonds continued: "He was found by his landlady. He had been shot. Unfortunately, this is all we know at the moment. I'm sure that the police will have more information. On behalf of the Prometheus Corporation, I extend my heartfelt condolences to you all. Furthermore, let me remind you that the incident is exactly that: an incident. Nothing more, and no less. However devastating, I see no reason for it to affect the Project and work shall continue as before.

"Again, let me stress the company's policy: tell the police whatever they want to know with regard to Theophilus Jordan, but his work is and will always remain top secret. I'm sure you understand."

The meeting was adjourned, paranoia written all over Larkin and Steinbaum's faces as they shuffled out of the room. Simmonds remained seated, silent and frowning. Amanda went to her lab and sat at her desk, stunned. Fear scratched at her solar plexus.

She was sure that they were all thinking the same thing: Theo was murdered. He'd breached the Project policy and been killed. But what had he known and revealed? And to whom? She, of all people, wasn't too bothered with the policy but she was also the one most removed from the project. At least it seemed so to her. As an AI Specialist, Amanda spent most of her time in Noid Lab 1, which suited her well enough. Although she always suspected that her work was somehow involved with that of Larkin, Steinbaum and Jordan, she could never be absolutely sure; she was only invited to every second or third meeting of the Project employees. In any event, from what she could glean there, the meetings weren't so much an exchange of ideas as a series of seemingly unrelated presentations and reports. Simmonds would preside, and at times it seemed as though he knew less about the subject matter than even they did.

Had something occurred at their last meeting that sparked all this off? She was supposed to have attended that one, but a Noid had gone bezerk in Lab 2, seriously injuring an apprentice technician, and she spent the morning handling that situation.

One thing seemed curiously certain: Simmonds didn't do it. He was no murderer. Although it was his duty to oversee the Project and, she suspected, liaise between them and whoever coordinated it, Simmonds was no more than an ignorant lackey: he gave the impression of being just another beleaguered and disinterested member of this 'top secret' little sub-division of the Corporation. The whole thing was a tangle of conspiratorial confusion and blind paranoia. Most of the time, Amanda tried to keep the affair out of mind, but now it had materialized as a potentially lethal circumstance, grave and ruthless. Who of them could believe that Theo's death had nothing to do with his involvement with the Project? She wished she could.

Panic balled at Amanda's throat and she felt like jumping into her Zoot and leaving this place to a crazy, dangerous past. However astronomical the salary, for the first time in a relatively secure life Amanda feared for her very survival. She feared that she would be killed.

Killed.

The word sounded ludicrous, like it belonged to a cheesy mobster holo-flick, but slid down the length of her spine like a cold finger nonetheless.

8

Thursday, 26 July 2084

09h38

Simmonds returned from the meeting to find Prometheus in the same position as he had left him.

"How did they take it?" Prometheus' words were slow and deliberate, like those of a person addressing another whilst holding the head of a writhing snake.

"Great," sneered Simmonds. "They couldn't stop celebrating."

He poured himself three fingers of cognac and resumed his place on the velvet couch, his body immediately slumping to the same slouch of the previous night. He looked as though he had lost a lot of money in an arbitrary bet.

"Where are you now," he asked Prometheus.

"Right here," smirked the old man. "Can't you see?"

"You know what I mean."

Prometheus' expression warped to that of intense concentration.

"Negotiating Finken," he rasped softly, distracted. "Shut up."

Simmonds shut up, sipping the cognac with a grimace.

"So close?" he asked, once Prometheus' expression became more relaxed.

As if in answer to his question, the door to the vast, bowl-shaped room opened and Jonathan Smith strode through it. It was as if Prometheus twin brother had walked into the room, only thirty or forty years younger.

"Watch this," whispered the older of the two, still unmoving. As he spoke, both he and Smith turned their heads to face Simmonds who, at the latter's appearance, stood up and gawked in awe. His slightly parted lips began to twitch when Smith lifted his hands to his face and popped both eyes smoothly out of their sockets with an elastic snap. Smith held them out towards Simmonds.

Prometheus said: "At last, I can really see you now." He was grinning and so was Smith. "Useful, don't you think, to have the sockets transmit visual data by neutrino beams rather than fiber-optic filaments. Remind me to give Amanda a raise. How ironic that of all our guinea pigs, his creator is the only one who hasn't encountered Jon Smith yet."

"She might recognize her own work," warned Simmonds.

"Look at me," said Smith.

Simmonds turned to him.

"Would you?"

Simmonds turned away, gulped the rest of his drink away, then went back to the couch to finish the bottle. Behind him, Smith and Prometheus' laughter echoed off the chambers curved walls in eerie chorus.

9

Thursday, 26 July 2084

12h45

"Amazing," came Simmonds' voice from behind her. "They breathe."

Amanda spun around. She didn't know how he'd entered the lab without her hearing. *Perhaps the same way he'd approached Theo*, screamed a voice in her mind.

"Only when they speak," she replied. "Noid vocal chords use compressed air to give their voices natural rhythm and tone. The rest of the time, they're just moving their chests in and out."

"Amazing," repeated Simmonds.

Amanda turned back to her work. She was micro-soldering a split synapse jumper in Cleric's brain, but at the same time she felt increasingly aware of Simmonds' presence behind her. He was stroking a leg which hung from a chain. The limb spun lifelessly at his touch.

"You have been awarded a pay increase," said Simmonds.

"A raise?" Amanda glanced up from her microscope, and thought: *Or a bribe? To keep me quiet when the police...*

"Congratulations," Simmonds' voice was as bland and perfunctory as always and Amanda was suddenly filled with disgust. She wished that he would go.

"Thanks," she managed to equal his monotone, and watched him leave in the reflection of the lab's glass walls.

Later that day, she saw Larkin sitting in his usual spot in the cafeteria.

"Hello, Richard," she said, putting her tray on the table beside his, but he didn't reply. He just looked up from his food and chewed slowly, contemplating her presence as though she were the physical manifestation of a vague and elusive thought.

"Can I join you?" she was already sitting down and teasing the plastic covering from her plate. Larkin looked around and shrugged.

"God," she said, "I didn't really know Theo but-"

"What are you, fucking crazy?" Larkin almost choked on his forkful of spaghetti, then became suddenly burly, his head poking outward over the table as though he were a hunchback.

Amanda drew back, blinking at the paroxysm.

"You want to get us both killed?" he wheezed, eyes wide.

"No," she began, "I-"

"Well shut the fuck up then," he hissed, "and smile. Better yet, go away."

Amanda took up her tray and left. Larkin continued to eat, bent over, trembling slightly, eyes rolling from side to side, like a small rodent in a corner surrounded by slaving fangs. The fluorescent lights and polished linoleum hummed brightly all around him, reflecting light even into the most clandestine creases and nooks everywhere.

10

Friday, 27 July 2084

07h17

Amanda read about Simmonds' death in the newspaper, handed to her by a perfectly operational Cleric with a mug of coffee and a croissant (her favourite: chocolate-butter; she'd requested that he pamper her a bit of late). She read the article numbly: something about the police finding a suicide note bearing a confession to a murder of Theophilus Jordan, a former employee of the Prometheus Corporation, already famous for the invention of the Inter-Ad. Some Luddite fundamentalist activity, suspected the article, riding the hype, or a Muslim, or both in conspiracy.

Amanda put the paper down and felt the world give way beneath her. Things simultaneously slotted into and out of place quicker than she could bear, and she was sick half-lurch to the toilet. Cleric inquired whether a doctor was required.

"No," she replied, after gargling at the basin, "a bodyguard."

Cleric took a few seconds to guess at the humour of the response.

"Ha ha," he laughed.

That day, Amanda Wallace skipped both gym and work.

11

Saturday, 28 July 2084

10h31

Amanda had been requested to appear at the Central Police Station. Only upon entering it did she begin to feel safe.

There, sitting on the faded and worn seats in the reception area which smelt of old tobacco and crime, was Anthony Steinbaum. He was rubbing the bridge of his nose, a plastic cup of coffee in his other hand. When he saw her, he smiled faintly and half-rose.

"It's a strange situation," he said, blinking. "I'm scared witless. Feel like I narrowly escaped punishment for something I don't know I did."

"Thin ice," Amanda nodded. "Looks like the worst is over."

"I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky."

"Lucky," said Amanda.

She looked about them. A few uniformed officers, male and female, drifted around. Noids paced the corridors of the building more purposefully, as if on invisible tracks, holding paper folders and diskettes. The police station was the one place where the Noid population seemed to match the human one. Many of the police-Noids' features were identical: young, brush-cut men and short-haired women with pug-noses and a permanent mixture of mirth and determination in their eyes. At your service.

They look like rugby players and lesbians, thought Amanda, how dry.

Indeed, all a Noid would be good for in policing would be paperwork and administration. Either that or the bomb squad. Criminals were far too quick and cunning to be apprehended by Noids.

But we're getting there, she thought. Unlike Steinbaum, who sat next to her chewing his lips and cheeks, finding a new job with her qualifications would not be a problem. She wondered if perhaps she shouldn't work for the police force, get that stereotypical civil-servant monotony out of their marble-and-filament eyes. Unlike the other 99.9% of the human population, that is what Amanda saw when she looked into a Noid's eyes: potential. At least if she somehow ended up working here, the change of jobs would be poetic; like quitting the Mafia to become a Narc. No: like quitting boxing for plastic surgery.

For the first time since Theo's death, Amanda felt safe.

"Who'd've thought it was Simmonds' doing," she said out loud. "Have you spoken to the police yet?"

"A bit," Steinbaum peered at her through his lenses. "Open-and-shut case."

"To close the Prometheus Corporation down, the police would've had to implicate the owner of the company. Who was it, in the end? Did you know?"

Steinbaum shook his head.

"Think about it," he said hollowly, "does it matter?"

"Okay then," Amanda stood up and reached out a hand. "Keep well."

"You too," replied Steinbaum, taking it. "Take care."

Amanda went to the Noid who sat behind the reception counter. She was sitting perfectly still. A thin wire ran from a modem on the desk to a discreet socket behind her ear. At Amanda's approach, she suddenly sprang to life, broad grin flashing slightly yellowed teeth at her.

"Good morning," said the Noid. "May I be of assistance?"

"Amanda Wallace," said Amanda. "Appointment."

She could almost see the bytes of information pumping through the wire in the Noids head as she gazed into her eyes.

"Room 314," chirruped the Noid. "Detective Chaskalson is expecting you."

Detective Chaskalson was a fleshy, anemic toad of a man, whose many chins billowed out from his unfastened collar like contour lines or watermarks which mapped out an officious history of countless hours of sitting on the hard chairs of the interview rooms. Amanda could tell that the case was considered closed before he even opened his mouth, that her being there was a mere formality. Chaskalson surveyed her with the bumptious irreverence of a bored and bloated monarch.

"It is our opinion," he croaked as soon as she was seated, inflections lending his speech a surreal and hypnotic lilt, "that Mister Jordan's death was a consequence of his intentions..." he broke off, elastic

lips sagging agape, then, just as suddenly, continued, "to divulge industrial secrets about an Inter-Ad to the media."

Amanda took in all the information as though it were air in the capsized yacht that was her life.

"Do you have anything to add?"

"Excuse me?"

"Anything to add to that?"

Somewhere beyond the opaque glass door of the interview room a telephone rang, footsteps clumped, objects rattled, papers shuffled, voices cawed like gulls in other rooms. Amanda watched a grime-percolated shaft of sunlight cast a bar of liquid gold between her and Chaskalson, and shook her head.

"You and your colleagues have been most helpful," he gloated, obviously pleased to have the case so easily filed. "Of course, the Prometheus Corporation will have to be liquidated under the circumstances."

"Yes," she grew impatient, "but who owned the company? Whose name was it registered under?"

Chaskalson's one eye closed partly. He gave her a look both patronizing and weary, as though his prostate ached from being there for that long already, and it was all her fault.

"Why, Mister Simmonds, of course," he said. "Your boss."

Then she knew that it wasn't over. She knew that they were all wrong, all of them, with her included.

12

Sunday, 28 July 2084

10h32

"Hi there."

Amanda's initial reaction to the blond youth who stood opposite her, whose messianic smile caused two perfectly symmetrical dimples to appear on his cheeks, was a flabbergasted half-smile: the type one would give to someone who had just appeared on their doorstep wearing a *papier mache* chicken head or lacy negligee and garish lipstick.

He waited for a response, hand outstretched, but got none. Amanda stood still, mouth agape. She was looking at the most perfect humanoid creation that she had ever dreamed possible. Something warm and restless flipped ecstatically below her accelerating heart.

My God, she thought, he's beautiful.

The Noid retracted his hand, but widened his grin.

"Hi there," he repeated, "I'm Jonathan Smith from the Police Department," flashing her an ID, "psychotherapy division," slotting it back into his shirt pocket and inclining his head towards her, "May I?"

Amanda's mind lurched. The Noid opposite her was a miracle of technology. He was perfect, right down to the fine, fair hairs on his hands and neck, more perfect than anything she had even dared to imagine seeing in her lifetime. A dream come true; literally. But - and the realization constricted her

mind and body - a Noid nonetheless. This she could tell more by professional intuition than empirical observation.

"Uh..." she swooned.

Her mind was screaming at her, but its messages were being drowned-out by the cacophonous, hysterical rapture of being face to face with such a creature.

Then it hit her like a smooth and icy dread:

Creature. Creator.

He wants me to think he's human.

Calling my bluff.

"...inside?" Amanda only caught the last word but it - its tone - was enough to confirm her suspicions.

"Uh, s-sure," she said, her efforts to remain calm aided by a clammy, numbing fear. She stepped aside.

Smith entered with a polite grunt. There was a spring to his step and general mien.

Amanda led him to the lounge, the day-lights flicking on automatically. Smith waltzed in like a friendly neighbor and seated himself on a chair. She noticed that he did not let himself sink into the seat, but perched on its edge like a shy client in a brothel. The position was as robotic as it was choreographed to his demeanor.

Christ, she found herself hypnotized by his presence, sweet Lord.

Ignoring Cleric completely. Only responds to his sounds. Neutrino vision? Simmonds?

Then the thought which had kept her up all night:

Simmonds didn't... wasn't...

Then:

Who?

Then she, herself, perched opposite him, hands on her lap, and allowed her eyes to feast on his form and motion as if he were the celluloid reproduction of a recently deceased lover being projected onto the wall. She knew that she was staring and noticed Smith writhe in his chair, a perfectly fluid, perfectly awkward, perfectly suited motion. His smile disappeared and now he blinked his dark-blue eyes at her.

Who made you?

Cleric: "Coffee?"

"No," said Smith, blunt and scarcely acknowledging the offer.

Amanda dismissed Cleric with a pre-ordained gesture.

"It must be quite traumatic," said Smith, "having two colleagues killed in such a short space of time."

"One colleague," Amanda testing, teasing, baiting this machine's program, "the other was the owner of the company."

"I stand corrected," Smith smiled.

"And the latter committed suicide, if you recall, Doctor..."

"Smith."

Smith.

"...Smith. Mr. Simmonds wasn't killed."

"How right you are," said Smith, as amiable as an adult discovered in his hiding place by laughing children.

If she didn't know better, Amanda would have thought that he was patronizing her. Like Chaskalson. Did *anybody* know what the hell was going on?

"As for your visit, Dr. Smith, I have already spoken to Detective Chaskalson and have nothing further to add to what I told him. I'm sure you understand that I want to get this whole business behind me as soon as possible."

Smith watched her from across the room for a long time. Amanda felt scanned, judged and it thickened the blood in her veins. All this time, his chest not only moved up and down, but inhaled and exhaled, his skin changing to fleshy white where his knuckles bent, his expressions shifting almost unnoticeably as if in tune to the 'thoughts' in his 'mind'. Impossible?

"I was just about to suggest," Smith waved a hand with a suddenly rediscovered air of bonhomie, "that you do exactly that. No use getting bogged down in this... unpleasant incident."

Pause, unpleasant incident. Genius touch. Impossibly subtle.

She followed him to the door and, after giving him her best mother-baking-cookies-on-TV smile, watched him amble casually down the driveway of the cluster-home complex and disappear around the corner. Then she took a few deep breaths and clutched her throbbing temples. Blood clapped and thundered in her ears. Amanda took her coat off the rack and rushed out of the door after him.

She found herself watching him cross the road from over an expensive artificial hedge. He looked like a handsome human being: walking an invisible pet; humming a repetitive tune that was lodged in his brain from tuning in to the radio in the morning; thinking about his mortgage bond; wondering what would be for supper when he got home. Amanda followed the Noid who called himself Dr. Smith to the Express Tube Station and there, in the crowd, saw him for what he really was: just another face in the crowd, another lost individual in the plankton-throng of a busy day.

She caught the tube compartment adjacent to his and found herself hopping off after him in a Northeastern Sub-District. Smith marched directly towards one of the plusher areas of the neo-city hub which slowly molted in shades of gray like the center which spawned it: the Red Zone, a filthy and abandoned core.

There are few things easier than stalking a Noid. They never look back. Not even this one, who seemed more human than some of the people he passed on the streets. It was Sunday, and the crowds bustled past him, parcels and wailing children in hand. Some probably even envied this evidently strapping and eligible bachelor; so young, so free, and focused on the way ahead of him like a bright-eyed idol while the rest of them sweated through the purgatorial Sunday chaos of shoppers and workaholics...

Smith and Amanda wound their way to a huge house which overlooked the decaying West of the city like a cruel tyrant. The gates opened and Amanda slipped in behind him before they could close.

Far enough, this is far enough.

But she went further.

Sunday, 28 July 2084

15h04

Prometheus led her. He allowed Amanda to keep up with Jonathan. There were times when he wondered if she had lost him, if he lost her, but then the crowd would break and there she would be in a convenient window reflection, scampering up behind him like an autograph hunter or darting behind a post when he rounded a corner like an extremely amateurish private eye.

Whether she would have followed him or not did not make much difference to him, but he was glad that she did. With Simmonds out of the way he needed her, so this moment would have to have happened in any event, and this was just one of the many possibilities of how it could have been. This way, he'd let her do all the hard work for him, the clever little bitch.

She knew. Perhaps. He was almost certain.

She *knew*.

The gates closed behind her slowly enough to let her enter. Jonathan conveniently entered through the open patio door. Prometheus got a good look at her when Jonathan walked down the passage to the Chamber's entrance: the full length mirror on the far wall displayed her head poking around the corner. Jonathan strode towards the Chamber's door very slowly and opened it with augmented deliberation. Then he saw himself on the couch and watched the same smirk which he knew was creeping over Smith's face appear on his.

They waited together in the Chamber, man and machine, one being, for the woman.

Sunday, 28 July 2084

15h56

Well, that was that. There she was. Deep in it, whatever it was. Either she went in after him or she didn't. And if she wouldn't, it would not be the end of it. Not like this. That she knew.

So she went inside.

Holding her breath, she sidled up to the door-frame and peeked. The door was open and the room behind it was a huge marble bowl. It's walls were a glossy satellite dish facing the open sky. There was no roof, only a meshy material, so fine that it was barely visible, stretching across in a wire-framed dome from the concave circumference.

Amanda gasped.

"Come in," she heard Smith say, and realized that the sight had so astonished her that she had been standing in the doorway, dazzled to a state of petrification. In this time, Smith had stepped up to her holding, of all things, a crystal flute of alcohol. She caught her breath again, slightly faint now.

There was another man in the room. He was reclining on a genuine leather easy-chair, bare feet up, a slim Neuro-strap buzzing lightly on his shaved skull. His skin was so white that his flesh had the pallid glow of a cadaver. An intravenous drip hung from a chrome frame next to the chair and fed a yellowish substance into a vein in his arm. He looked very old.

Smith, following her gaze:

"That's me."

Amanda understood, took the cognac from Smith's hand, and drank.

15

Sunday, 28 July 2084

16h47

"Can you see it, my vision?" Smith was standing behind Prometheus, which Amanda had insisted on, to allow her to conceptualize the psyche-technological link between the two as a merging of beings, and which Prometheus had gladly obliged her, presuming his cooperation to facilitate rather than indulge hers.

"Can you? Do you see that short of putting the parts together and molding the mask, it is you who created Jon? Forgive me the deception. You had no idea that I could find the necessary technology to make your theoretical conjectures real. Think of it as necessary plagiarism, Amanda.

"For over a century now, we have dabbled in the profane realms of cyber-hacking. There is nothing easier than that. Every protection program sees its eventual demise and the information is eventually diffused throughout the cyber-realm according to the inevitable phenomenon of technological osmosis. It is a pattern that has bored me to the point of insanity. The creation whereby I am communicating with you is a result of both the boredom and the insanity. It is the next step. Frankly, I am surprised to be the first person on the planet to have thought of it. Aren't you?

"Since most of the subjects had their itineraries and diaries on PC's, I could hack into their very lives. But this wasn't enough. It was like reading about sex in books as a child. I wanted more. I wanted to transcend knowledge and enter the physical realm. Don't you see that Jon is more than just a Neuro-strap controlled Noid? He is a manifestation of the power of the cyber-realm in everyday reality! Do you see?"

All this coming from the mouth of the monster:

"Now, today, more than ever, the information we can find on the Net can bring us closer to the divine state of omnipotence. I have created your best friend, but without the emotional strings attached: a stranger who can sit next to you in a launderette and just happen to be reading the same book as you, who can pick you out in a crowd and tell you that he loved your performance in the school play twenty years ago, the performance which you consider to be the greatest epiphanic experience of your entire life, the one you'll always remember, always cherish or never live down.

"Amanda, comprehend: I am hacking *from* the cyber-realm - which has all the information - into reality as we know it, which is one protracted mad rush to accrue it. You tell me: am I wrong to want to do this?"

Amanda shivered. The whole time that Smith was talking, she was watching the old man, whose mouth only twitched slightly at times when the Noid's voice boomed.

"Naturally, we had to initialize Jon's assimilation into the world in the incestuous confines of the company's employees. You were all reclusive in your own ways. Yes, you too. But at least that was a safeguard against you conferring and putting two and two together. Allow me to congratulate myself on the psychological choreography of the whole affair.

"My success has been wonderful, I'm sure you'll agree. I've put the 'human' back into 'Noid'."

"Yes," she said, genuinely enthralled, but the next word caught in her throat for a split second before it was uttered, "wonderful."

"I'm so pleased that you can see the importance of this evolution, Amanda."

"But won't you speak to me yourself. Strapless. Not through the machine."

"The machine', Amanda? Listen to yourself. I have been living my life through Jon since his functional inception. My physical body is but a shell, and a brittle and old one at that. I can hardly breathe."

Amanda studied Prometheus then. Indeed, he looked withered and comatose - older than life.

"Then let me inspect your new body, Mr. Prometheus," she said, walking up behind Smith. "I'm sure I can improve on even your current state."

Smith and Prometheus smiled in unison.

"I was hoping you would say that," for the first time, the old man spoke with his own voice, a shrill and gravelly rumble. It sounded like a final behest but Amanda was unmoved.

Stroking the back of Smith's head, finally allowing her voice to flood with the awe she'd been feeling, she asked: "Can I see?"

In response, Smith brought his chin down to his chest. Amanda parted a clandestine flap of scalp and clicked open the section of his titanium skull which housed the Noid's brain. She gazed at the miracle of its circuitry.

So simple. Of course.

She reached in, nudged a switch.

In the split second before Prometheus' brain exploded, he felt the whirl of something which sounded like the approach of a flock of birds. A tremendous flap-crackling of a million crows' wings, perhaps; or vultures.

Birds of death, nonetheless.

That is the sound of a quadrillion artificially enhanced brain pulses charging your brain: wings.

The only sign which Amanda had that she had been successful was a trickle of blood which oozed from the old man's ear. When she saw this, she hoisted the nearest solid object to her, which happened to have been a bust of Isaac Newton, and brought it down into Jonathan Smith's cerebral cavity with all her might.

Then she went home, in an ascetic daze, and did the same to Cleric.

16

Sunday, 28 July 2084

19h08

Patrolman Juniper Werth never complained in the locker room with the others. Unlike them, he'd chosen this job and enjoyed the glitzy beat of the Mall's neon and glass corridors, so different from the dusty roads, filth and inbred retrogression of home. Here was the buzz and excitement of civilization, here lurked miracle and wonder. Here he stood among laser-mongers and holographic Coca-Cola cans which people walked through. Here he watched scanners flip and maitre'd's hover in fancy restaurants.

But best of all weren't the maitre'd's who floated on their gimmicky discs; best of all were the waitrons. Hell, all Noids for that matter. Patrolman Werth found them infinitely fascinating.

He'd only seen one before, as a boy, when a traveling hospital passed through his rural village. The Noid was a packhorse of needles and contraptions, an android at the most. But he filled young Juniper Werth with an urge to seek his mysterious urban origins which culminated in his illegal crossing of the border at the fragile age of seventeen. Now here he was. And he was ever-grateful.

Yes, Patrolman Werth enjoyed his job, unlike the others who would grumble about boredom and poor pay. After all, he got to interact with Noids all the time and watch the rapid glacial tides of shoppers and businessmen in the Mall. And there was rarely any trouble.

So when his intra-aural Com-unit suddenly filled his head with demands for Patrolmen in Sector D, he and Walter - his ever-bored, ever-curse-muttering partner - took a casual stroll there until they could hear the commotion. A woman screaming. The smashing of glass. She was about thirty years old and had brown hair which spilled across her saliva-streaked and rage-distorted face in matted clumps. To Patrolman Werth, she looked like a poisoned animal. She was attacking a Noid, one of the newer models, who had been promoting a range of toiletries to passersby.

The Noid was not programmed to deal with this situation.

"Only doing my job," was the most relevant message she could muster, "only doing my job," over and over again as the enraged woman hit her with a dustbin.

In constraining the woman, Walter received a rake across his face and Patrolman Werth fractured his wrist in two places. But by then there were others, some citizens too. In the end it took seven of them to subdue the madwoman.

The first mad human Werth had ever seen.

Luddite or Muslim, it did not matter: her eyes haunted him for the rest of his life.

Epilogue

Monday, 5 August 2084

Dr A N Karpov
Institute of Psychopathology
[http:// www.techmed@Ipsy.x](http://www.techmed@Ipsy.x)

Professor J M McCarthy
Dean of Robotics
University of South Crawden
<http://www.rolcon@USC.viv>

Re: Amanda Wallace, Case #317

Dear Professor McCarthy

As requested, I am just dropping a mail to let you know that the patient which you referred to our care is still in an emotionally unstable condition and displaying frequent bouts of extreme paranoid-schizophrenic behaviour in the presence of Noids.

It is sadly ironic and greatly puzzling that Ms Wallace, a once well-respected technician, has added to the growing numbers of those who harbor or repress certain doubts when it comes to the technological advancement of the human race. A pity we can't prevent the Luddites as much as cure them. We have subsequently relegated the case to the Technophobia Treatment Sanctuary in Scarborough. I hesitantly predict that hers is a particularly serious case, beyond the grace of successful treatment.

Nevertheless, I remember your words of wisdom to me in my formative years and never give up hope that man and machine can live together in harmony. "Symbiosis" was, I believe, the word you used. I will let it guide me.

Yours faithfully,

Andrew Karpov, PhD.

The Mayors of Cadiz

He had been walking in the desert for three days before he reached the town. He could tell that he was in the right place because for a man to be walking in the desert for as long as he had and arrive in a town whose thirst swallowed him like an inferno fed a sheaf of straw, had to have been the source of the reward. The town's streets were hollow, a nexus of corridors of desolation. Making his way towards the center, Hack wondered whether it was already deserted, and he, therefore, too late.

But he found a man sleeping next to a spear in the meager afternoon shade of a well. Hack approached him and had to nudge his ankle to announce himself. The man slowly opened his eyes and rose onto his elbows. Hack slung his waterskin off his shoulder and proffered it to him. You could hear the dryness of the air like a soft, hot inhalation all around.

"I'm sorry, stranger," the prostrate man's voice was barely audible, "there's not even enough for the citizens of this town. You'll have to apply for rations with the mayor."

Such resilient madness, thought Hack. A guard. He had learned that the town, Cadiz, was once a second-stop in a furious gold-rush to the mountains. But when the gold disappeared and the desert began to encroach from the north, the two settlements ahead of it and the one behind had folded to the harshness and isolation of their surroundings. It was said that the topmost, Styghton, had completely vanished beneath the sands. But Cadiz survived.

"Not holding it out to you, friend," said Hack, "'s much as for you."

The guard looked up at him as though he were insane, then rose, grasped the waterskin and gulped thrice. His lips bled when he handed the water back to Hack, the dry skin split by a weak smile.

"As a matter of fact, mayor's the man I'm looking for here," Hack said.

The guard squinted through sun-chapped eyelids, appraising him for a long time before he replied.

"Strange," he said, "you don't look like a Rainmaker."

Hack had never actually seen a Rainmaker, though the Southlands were rife with tales of their uncanny successes. During his time on his Uncle's farm, he had heard stories about the men and women who would travel from one drought-stricken region to the next and bring wet winds with them; some called it the devil's work, others a miracle. Then Hack's own gift was discovered, and the local pubs and surrounding villages buzzed with the news.

"I'm no Rainmaker," Hack told the guard, "but I'll bring you enough water to sink your whole body in tomorrow. P'raps sooner. Just show me the way to the mayor's house."

The man's eyes widened at such talk and he stuck out an arm in the direction of an alley which led from the square. He told Hack to follow the road until he came across a wall with a copper plaque. Hack thanked him and went on his way through streets. They channeled the torpor of the place through him, as if coaxing him to succumb to the endlessness of the heat.

*

The plaque was enormous. It gleamed in the sun. On it were written two names and next to them, in brackets, dates. These Hack barely noticed. He proceeded directly to the front door. When he knocked, a fine layer of dust was disturbed on its surface. Hack looked about him and saw a place half-swallowed by the stuff. Why would anyone want to remain here, never mind offer seventy-five gold nuggets for its redemption? What sort of man would guard the well at another's command and for who?

The Mayor of Cadiz was so short that Hack thought the door had swung open of its own accord. Inevitably paunchy for his diminutive standing, he was wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeved khaki shirt. He had a magnificent moustache whose ends were fraying from the decaying hold of flaky, dry wax. As if he had read Hack's bewilderment at the growth, the Mayor withdrew a small tin of wax from his left pocket and quickly twirled a bit onto each end. The motion was as elegant as it was mechanical: the whole while the Mayor seemed to be surmising Hack's towering presence.

He said, "Southerner."

"Indeed," said Hack, raising a finger at waist-level. "N'must be the Mayor of Cadiz."

"Indeed," said the Mayor, lighting the stub of a cheroot. "Help you?"

"I'm here to claim seventy five gold nuggets, sir."

The Mayor took a few steps back. Smoke billowed freely from beneath his moustache.

"Don't look like a Rainmaker," he said.

Hack sighed, "M'not."

The Mayor raised a prodigious brow.

"Indeed?"

Hack's jaw set like an anchor in a bed of clay. He may as well have been a Rainmaker. The worst wasn't the fear in some people's eyes when they knew, the ostracism, the constant suspicion of Uncle Boe's neighbor and his daughters, no; the worst was the terrible and unfathomable awe of *yourself*. To be able to bring water. To be able, and not know why or where the ability comes from. As a matter of principle, he completely sympathized with the Mayor's indignation at the mention of the word. They were crystal-waving ghouls by the telling of one tale at the local pub back home, and charming illusionists by another.

"Indeed," Hack said.

At that moment, an old woman appeared behind the Mayor wearing a light blue dress. Although her face was drawn to a multitude of wrinkles, the permanent expression of benevolence on her face left smooth bowls of powdered skin on her cheeks and loops like the grain of wood on either side of her forehead. She whispered something in the Mayor's ear. He grunted.

"Come inside, Southerner," he said.

The woman left a scent of flowering meadows in her wake as she led the two men to a verandah. The awnings which stretched above them had developed tiny dunes of fine sand where they sagged. The Mayor's house, Hack noticed, suffered not so much from destitution as waning faith in some obsolete modicum of glory. The message on the copper plaque sprang up in his mind and he decided that the Mayor and the woman, most probably his wife, were forcing the madness of their age on this place.

"I understand t'you be offering seventy-five gold nuggets for water," Hack dispensed with any preamble immediately. A cold ale was definitely not on offer, and the less time he had to spend in this place the better. He'll take his seventy-five nuggets and build himself a house near a river somewhere. Somewhere where he would never be asked to use his freakish talent ever again. "Nuggets big as a child's fist, I've heard, though I shan't be mezzin'." He paused, sipped the water, added: "Each 'v' em."

The Mayor bristled. He reached into the depths of his fuming moustache, extracted the chewed nib of the cigar, still billowing like a crop-burn, and crushed it into a long golden tray with grooves in it. Beside this tray lay a massive pipe with a brass-ringed bowl. This he picked up and began to stoke until the smoke had obscured most of his upper body. The Mayor was sitting in a chair which seemed custom-made, allowing him to rest on it and maintain a regal, smouldering grandeur. His wife nodded between them with a faint smile playing on her lips.

"Already have a Rainmaker employed," the Mayor growled. His voice was disembodied by the smoke. "Forty nuggets each," said the reeky, seething murk.

"Why?" challenged Hack. "First one to bring you water takes the whole seventy-five. Eighty, then."

"How will I know?" The tip of the great pipe poked through the veil it spewed as the Mayor leaned forward, "Two of you may have more luck 'n one. And luck's the only thing I grant services of -"

"M'not a Rainmaker," Hack said quickly, hissing the two syllables of the word as though it were poison, "and I've enough luck to irrigate Cadiz into an oasis."

At Hack's last phrase, the Mayor rose and walked to the edge of the verandah which overlooked a distant mirage. Hack just caught the word that he muttered between teeth which clenched the pipe in a now-slightly-slackened jaw:

"Oasis," he whispered.

Hack looked at the old man, then the desert - this rotund chimney of an old man and the ravenous bleakness - and pondered their bond. Life suffers to live here, he thought. A sound from the Mayor's wife brought him out of his reverie. It was the first time she had spoken.

"If you are not a Rainmaker," she asked, "how do you intend to claim the reward?"

Hack looked into her eyes, the old woman's sparkling eyes, and felt the first twinges of that awkwardness which started in his throat and ended in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't actually practiced his gift for some time now. Actually, he had capitulated and provided his cousin with another, closer well during his sojourn at that farm on the way to Cadiz... but that was more out of sympathy for Wanda, their daughter, who had to walk so far to collect water each day and reminded him so much of a kinder version of Boe's neighbor's eldest daughter. Before then, not for two years. Water was thicker than blood when it turned you into a monster in your own eyes.

Holding the old woman's gaze, Hack said: "I dig."

When Hack was sixteen years old he made a spade. He used oak for the handle and forged the blade with his father's help. Soon after, he was orphaned by a fire and moved to the West Coast where

his father's brother, Boe, lived. The first time Hack discovered his ability to strike water was when he was using this spade to dig a pea-bed for his aunt. He remembered that he had been thinking about the last time he saw his parents at the time. His father was sharpening the plough, his mother's silhouette was visible through the curtains of the kitchen window. He had a vision of these curtains burning, bent down to touch the soil where he had been digging the bed, and felt mud.

It seemed at first that the entire section of the land where Hack's aunt wanted the peas planted was a thinly covered subterranean marsh. They moved the pigs there. The next day, when Boe suggested he try the land on the other, drier, side of the farmhouse, Hack soon had it spewing water from where he dug deeper than a foot or so. "By Thrumm," said Boe over supper that night, "we're living on top of an underground lake." Nevertheless, the house's foundations remained firm.

The following week, Hack was digging a trench on the other side of a hill on the periphery of the land. A spring flows there now. But it wasn't until Hack helped dig the foundations for Boe's neighbor's barn that the trouble began. Boe's neighbor, Shassick, had heard of the new spring that now flowed freely between his land and Boe's and his daughters spun gossip of Hack's penchant for unleashing underground streams like cruel crows. When Hack struck water only half a foot into the ground, Shassick pointed at the muddy spot and said, "I have tried to bore there before, with no success."

That was enough. Shassick's daughters' tongues did the rest and he could feel people's eyes on him as those who lived nearby hoisted the sides of the barn up with ropes. That night, as Boe's family sat down to the evening meal, there was a knock at the door and a stranger who claimed to own a stretch of land nearby with no water begged Boe to allow Hack to 'perform his miracle' there. "Hire a Rainmaker," Boe told him gruffly, then closed the door in his face. The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. Hack burned in his own confusion and guilt, but said nothing either.

The next day he took the spade which his father had helped him make, and another which was resting on the side of the house, and stalked off over the hills with them both. He found a desolate patch of ground, wrapped the 'magic' spade in his shirt, picked up the second, and proceeded to dig with it. As he dug, he became more and more sure that he was doing the right thing. The soil beneath Boe's spade remained dry and unyielding. He thought about his father, whether it was perhaps his spirit which resided in the spade they had forged together, and the ground where Boe's spade bit became dark and moist. He looked to the first spade, still bundled in his shirt on the dry ground next to him, then the second in his hand, then the spreading dank darkness where the normal blade had confirmed his greatest fear. There was something wrong with him, and it had nothing to do with the spades he used.

The sun had begun to set over Cadiz and stars were already visible through the graying orange glow above. The Mayor set his still-smouldering pipe down lit a new cigar with evident relish. "Dig," he repeated, and Hack braced himself against the inevitable look of suspicion or disbelief. Instead the Mayor cast another wistful glance across the darkening bleakness beyond them and sighed. His wife was looking at her hands which lay like withering petals in her lap. Eventually, the Mayor spoke:

"My mother was a wonderful woman," he said, puffing, "but she married a man who loved only liquor and gold. He left us here on the way to the rush in the mountains, where he died. The only time I have ventured beyond Cadiz was to spit on his grave. Couldn't find it. Back then Cadiz was little more than a cluster of tents 'n one tree. *One* tree. When all the gold was gouged from the mountains and the flow of people stopped, so did the water supply. Cadiz needed its own."

This much Hack had known. But the Mayor wasn't finished yet.

"Enter Frepp McFrey. Took one look around, dug up the only tree in sight, dug so deep you couldn't see him 't mid-day. Found a trickle of water on the second week which ran dry a year after he died. A year *to the day*, Southerner. That man was so connected to this place that it breathed him. Filled the well f'r a coupla years but by the time Cadiz was handed over to me, it was already dying. Drying. Whichever end of whichever underground stream Frepp found is without a doubt the last, and no longer.

"There are no more trees in Cadiz," said its Mayor. "N'ant will be."

Hack had listened to the Mayor's tale dispassionately. He said: "I'll need a mule to help me carry the nuggets, if any have survived."

Hack spent the night in a small room next to the kitchen in the Mayor's house. The following morning he rose and walked the streets of the town again, lost in thought. He decided to wait until sundown to begin digging, when it was cooler, then take the seventy-five nuggets and settle down in the Eastern Lowlands, next to a river, where the escarpment poured water onto the plains beneath it and water was as plentiful as heat in Cadiz. Then he would never have to pick up a spade again for as long as he lived. Fishing, he'd heard, was fun.

A few people shuffled silently through the streets like apparitions. None looked up at him, nor each other, and all walked alone like lost pilgrims. It was as though the heat had stolen their powers of speech or recognition. He felt uncomfortable each time someone passed him and found himself on the periphery of the town, squinting into a mirage in the distance.

At first she was a black pixel in the mirror of the mirage which would disappear then reappear as she walked towards him. Hack thought she was a rock, then a tumbleweed, then, when he could discern limbs and a torso, a lunatic walking through the desert towards Cadiz. She was wearing black. When she was some hundred fence-measures from him, she stopped, raised her hands in the air and stood there like that, like a lightning-struck tree. Then she began to sing.

From where he stood, Hack could hear her voice only at the zeniths of its ululation. It sounded like the wind-snatched cries of a gull, as though she were invoking the spirit of something oceanic in the skies. Rainmaker, he thought, and his heart raced towards this mystery like a child's. His legs carried him to her and before he was aware of it, he was standing behind her as her song rose to a bleak and sad pitch. When he tapped her on the shoulder, she choked on the note, spun around and shot him a glare that stopped his heart in mid-bounce.

She was slender, narrow-faced, with incredibly wide lips, and her pale skin had blistered where it was scorched by the sun. Hack, more dazzled by what she stood for than where she stood, blinked.

Sweat dripped from his chin. She bared her teeth like a pugnacious rodent and Hack thought, for a moment, that she was going to bite him. Instead she spat a phrase in some foreign language and made a shrill growling noise in her throat.

"Rainmaker," was all Hack could manage.

She stormed past him and waved a hand. He stood and watched her go, her black robes and jewelry dancing in the haze. Rainmaker, he mouthed, and managed to tear his eyes away from her receding figure to cast his eyes upward and search the heavens. He sniffed at the air, squinting. Not a cloud in sight. Had he been expecting some?

When he returned to the Mayor's abode, she was sitting in the same chair which he had occupied the previous evening. The Mayor was sitting in his special chair facing her and smoking a thin black cigar which smelt like something dying. His wife was nowhere to be seen.

"Southerner," said the Mayor without rising, "meet Althea. Althea, this is the man I was telling you about."

"Hack," said Hack, arm outstretched, rigid.

Althea's eyes narrowed. Hack withdrew his hand.

"We've, uh, already met," said Hack.

"He was du von," hissed Althea.

"The one?" the Mayor raised a bushy eyebrow.

"Du von vot interrupted me," she pouted.

The Mayor darkened.

"Look, Hack," he said slowly, "however happy I am to have two people vying for the reward, subterfuge is intolerable."

Hack's indignation flared, but he did not reply, and so it was that he left them sitting on the verandah and went back to his room feeling like a scolded child. He dozed off then and when he woke the heat had filled the room thickly, making it difficult to breathe. He poked his head from the door and saw the Mayor's wife stirring a pot in the kitchen. He could smell her, her freshness, from where he stood. She felt his presence and turned to face him.

"How long till sundown?" he inquired.

"Not long," she replied, turning her attention back to the pot. "I have some food here that will be ready before then."

Just then, the sound of raised voices came to them from the street. Hack looked at the Mayor's wife quizzically but she continued to tend the food with an air of stubborn diligence. When he asked about the noise she shrugged, so he went outside to see for himself. The Mayor was talking animatedly to a group of people who, Hack guessed, were a family. They were carrying bundles of baggage over their shoulders. The Mayor was addressing the man who carried the largest of these bundles. His voice was supplicant but, at the same time, firm. The man hung his head and shook it slowly from side to side. At last the Mayor huffed and dismissed them with a wave of his arms, then shook his head also and

walked back to the house past Hack. Hack saw a look on the Mayor's face which he hadn't seen before: the faintest, bitter glimmerings of defeat.

The family, in the meantime, had picked up their belongings and prepared for the trek south, racing the onslaught of the sun. Clever man, thought Hack, travel at night, sleep by day. Go. Flee this place. It's not worth the well I'll dig it.

The ground was covered by approximately three inches of fine, white dust but beneath that, the soil was as hard as sandstone or semi-baked clay. Hack had to put his entire weight behind the swing of the pick-axe which the Mayor had given him, and even then his progress through the crust was excruciatingly slow.

Father, he meditated on each stroke, mother. Mother, father.

It was dark but the night had just recently wooed the last shade of purple from the east. Currents of air swirled over and through Cadiz, alternately hot and cold, never temperate. The moon was full and shone brightly enough to cast clear-cut shadows everywhere. Hack noticed the absence of crickets, which trilled so loudly in the Southlands that they could keep you up at night.

When he had dug a few feet into the ground, he stopped, put the pick-axe down and scrutinized the soil, rubbing it between his fingers and pushing his fingertips into the deepest crevasses of the hole. Dry. Dead-dry. Dead and dry and as unyielding to the next few swings of the implement as when he had first begun.

He was digging in the town square, close to where the old well was. A woman's face had appeared in a window overlooking the square when he started, but disappeared into the gloom behind when he caught her wide eyes and winked and waved. This suited him well enough; he preferred to work in solitude. It occurred to him that the same might have applied to Althea and he cursed himself under his breath for having disturbed her like a fool.

Perhaps she, too, felt cursed. Perhaps she, too, had decided to put her curse to profitable use. He resisted the sudden urge to find her and confirm this. Instead he picked up the axe and dug deeper, though with less vehemence than before. Somehow, he was less surprised than he thought he would be at his initial failure. After a few more increasingly half-hearted jabs, he covered the hole loosely and decided to try his... luck elsewhere.

This time he stalked about the edge of the town until he felt drawn to a particular spot and there he began to dig again. This time, the ground gave more easily but not due to any hint of moisture. Nevertheless, this was encouragement enough. Leaving the gouged ground of his second attempt as it was, Hack walked deeper into the now-cool wilderness and, with an almighty swing, plunged the pick-axe into it for the third time. This time, the earth bit the tooth of the hoe and refused to let go. The pick-axe simply wouldn't budge. Hack cursed violently and strained to wrench it free. He put his shoulder under the wooden shaft and heaved upwards and it was in this position that Althea found him.

"Need help?" she said. Her accent drew her lips over her teeth, but she wasn't smiling.

Hack rose, panting, and licked his lips. The pick-axe was still sticking out of the ground at an angle. He struggled to compose himself, but some mixture of chagrin and romance made his heart race

and he felt more flushed now than when he had been digging. Althea held a small green bottle of water out to him which he had to restrain himself from snatching and draining. He waved a palm at her and shook his head, his pride burying his thirst.

"Whose side are you on?" he chuckled. His throat was dry, but not so much from thirst as nerves. Althea studied him guardedly and although his very soul shifted and buckled beneath her gaze, Hack did not look away. Breathe easy, damn you, he urged himself, calm down. He felt nervous about feeling nervous about her. Uncle Boe used to say that it sometimes happens that way around some women.

But Althea was a Rainmaker; her womanhood seemed inconsequential. Hack's heart thundered. There was a question in him that he had to ask her, this Rainmaker standing before him, and it had to do with something which bound them together with every iota of fear that came to him from his waking dreams. It had to do with the very core of his presence there, and hers, and it made his heartbeat beat in strange, strange places. As strange as the one they were in then; this nowhere. This monument to nothingness in the desert.

"What difference does eet make," she asked, turning her face up to the stars, "who brings the water, or how? As long as the earth here drinks."

"The earth drinks?" Hack didn't mean for it to sound as much as a question as it did.

Althea looked at him. For once she seemed to shed an aura of detachment in his presence, as though he had suddenly ceased to be a source of some minor and irascible irritation. She cocked her head and smiled.

"Water," she said.

"Water," he said, and shot a glance at his pick-axe, a moondial casting the shadow of their time on the mesa. "Don't care what happens to this place. Just want my gold nuggets. Buy myself a place next to a river somewhere."

She frowned. "I love eet," she said.

He frowned. "Love it?"

"Cadeez."

The town glimmered a bit, silhouetted by stars. He motioned to the water she'd brought. She handed it to him and he took a soothing chug.

"You're a Rainmaker," he said after a while.

"So some say," she replied. "And you hope to strike water by greed and chance."

Hack realized that the way he'd spoken the word must have set her on edge. He couldn't help it. His voice warbled when he spoke of things he didn't understand. This is why he could not contemplate some parts of himself and why he feared them. Althea seemed to hold the key to a few of these parts.

"S'not chance," Hack spat. He strode across to where the pick-axe poked from the ground and heaved against it. It wouldn't budge. Cursing under his breath, he scanned the nightscape. She stood between him and the town, cut from its shadows like a ghost. He could not contain himself any longer: the question which he had been waiting his whole life to ask passed beyond his lips and occupied the space between them like a set trap. Only he didn't feel like the predator; he felt like the prey. He spoke the question and froze in anticipation of her answer.

"Do what?" she replied.

"It," he said. "It. How do you do what you do? What do you do, anyway?"

Therein lay the answer to himself, the portal to a gaping black pit that he harboured in dreams that would make him sweat, thoughts that would make him cringe beneath his very existence. She shook her head and bent down to brush her hands over the sand and small, sharp pebbles at her feet.

"I sing," she said. "Sing about the Earth drinking." She got up and faced him, hands on her hips. "Then it rains."

"What do you think about?"

"Rain," she said slowly, as though he were having difficulty following the conversation.

Hack looked from her to the pick-axe to the blood-filled blisters on his palms. His expectancy and pain deflated and he felt like the sail of the ghost ship his Uncle had told him about when they went to the harbour in Banana Bay to purchase spice and drink exotic flavours of ale.

She sings, he thought, and I dig. Neither have a clue beyond that.

He left the pick-axe where it was and idled back to Cadiz. He did not feel confused as much as weak-kneed from anticlimax. Sing, he kept musing and muttering to himself. He hadn't even noticed that he'd left her there until he reached the Mayors house. He stood outside it and read the names on the plaque: Frepp McFrey and Samuel Boggwatch. The date after Boggwatch was - as yet - undetermined, a dash.

He wondered what Althea's surname might be, if she even had one. It would look good there under the last. A madwoman in love with a mad place. Tomorrow he would try once more, with a trustier implement. If he didn't succeed then, she could keep it. Heat and dust and gold and all.

Hack woke to the strangest sound he'd ever heard. It took him a few deep, conscious breaths to realize what it was and come stumbling from the house like a man in search of a midwife. What struck him first and foremost was the sunlight. He'd expected clouds. Clouds brought rain, but there were no clouds. Just a phenomenal, sunlit downpour - and another sound, apart from the susurrant of drops on pooling puddles, like a million termites devouring a field of dry vegetation: the sound of the Earth drinking after a very long time.

The square was manic with activity. People were rushing about, gasping, clutching empty containers of various sorts and sizes, some laughing, some crying. An old man trundled blindly around the square with his palm up and a wild smile on his face. He was shaking his beard and licking his lips. "Am I dead?" he was saying into the space before him. "Celia, are you there?"

"You're not dead, old man," Hack told him. "It's raining."

The old man seemed not to hear: a deaf and blind man who thought he was dead, walking the street in peripatetic delusion. Hack turned his face to the sky, a brilliant blue infused with the blaze of the raindrops. Cloudless rain. Hack opened his mouth.

The Mayor stood at the well and was bellowing instructions to a group of men, among them the guard Hack had spoken to upon his arrival. The awning had been taken off the well and converted into a funnel. The Mayor was bawling for an extension of the funnel's circumference. Water was gushing into

the well. His wife was beaming, scattering handfuls of what looked like fine, black seeds around the square. People were whooping and dancing, a baying chaos. Some children were lying on their backs with their mouths open wide and their hands raised to the sky.

Hack found Althea by following her song. She was crying. Hack couldn't tell by the tears; they were lost in the rain. He could tell by the grimace and the shaking of her body.

"Do you all cry," he asked her, "when it happens?"

She didn't answer him then. Later he was to learn that she was overcome with grief at the false hope she had brought upon the people of the town. Later, planting sunflowers on the patch of land just behind Samuel Boggwatch's verandah for his wife to look at in her softly senile, smiley mourning, she told him. Althea was sad because it would be impossible to bring rain to Cadiz again. Some places had a block on them, she said. Cadiz was one.

For those you sang a different, sadder song. A requiem.

And for some thirty years, Althea never did bring the spontaneous showers of the Rainmakers to Cadiz. She couldn't... she didn't need to, for Hack did not dig it a well, he gave it a river. The brief and sole spurt of precipitation that Althea had unleashed over Cadiz loosened the ground where Hack had imbedded the pick-axe, and shortened her moment of intense grief to a few minutes. For when Hack ripped it from the rain-softened ground, a spring, so perfectly positioned that it flowed directly through an outlying section of the town, creating Cadiz's first canal, welled through the ground. It was the first of many. Cadiz grew to filter the flow of Hack McGrath's river, grew to a prosperous city full of wonders of irrigation that curious travelers would flock to see from the furthest parts of the continent.

The town square grew a carpet of grass.

Hack built a house a little way from the town, and bred fish in the river. He neither asked for his gold, nor was he offered it. But his name was nevertheless etched-in next to Althea's on the plaque. Althea lived in the Mayor's house, initially as a friend, then manager, then owner of the abode. People returning from their exile from Cadiz would say that the town had two separate Mayors then. Until they began living together - and the floods came. But that is, as they say, another story - a love story, actually - and for another time.

Willie Meyer's Desert

1

If it weren't for the desert's effect, none of this would have happened. I know that now. The desert has a way of stripping a human being down to his very essence, his animal core, around which everything else revolves like superfluous and meaningless nonsense. In the desert you can run your hand along the sand-encrusted, gnarled bark of a stunted tree and feel the common thread of life which binds you to it, because in the desert you can be completely surrounded by nothing upon nothing for as far as you can see, as far as you can imagine, and imagine yourself, there, alive.

The place has a way of putting things into perspective, which is why the five of us were there.

We were camping in a desolate region called Spitzkoppe in Namibia, at the base of one of several rocky, spire-like outcrops. From its top you could see the infinite flatness all around speckled with these canine protuberances. From the eyrie, they looked imbedded, as though they had rained down in some celestial shower like darts when the Earth wasn't even solid yet, then set there. Not much had happened in this place since then; a few hardy plants and insects perhaps, some windy shiftings of sand.

"I want to be here when it rains," Sally once said. She had a way of making me fall in love with her over and over again.

By our fourth day in the campsite, Sally and I - all of us in fact - had lapsed into synchronised timelessness. Each lived according to the inner rhythm of our most basic survival instincts. Sally and I would wake early in the morning, crawl back into our tent at around midday, sleep through most of the afternoon, then wake up again towards dusk, making love, cocooned.

Simon, the fledgling Buddhist, whose idea the excursion was in the first place, spent a lot of time meditating and walking on his own. He had certainly come to the right place. You couldn't help but empty yourself into the silent vacuum there sometimes. Charl, Simon's older brother, was there too. At first I thought he had joined us to forget about his recent divorce, or at least to think about it more objectively, but, in retrospect, I can tell that Charl wasn't there *because* of the desert. Charl was there despite it. It made him even more miserable in a way, and he wallowed in this from the moment we crossed the border. Then there was Derrick. I liked Derrick from the moment we met, which was the morning we left for Namibia. He had come all the way from Knysna when he heard about Charl's divorce. He and Charl had been in the army together, Derrick had piercing eyes that shot deep laugh-lines to his temples. Of all of us, he was the one least affected by the surroundings, spending the days reading books on Marxism and subsistence farming. He had brought things like awnings for shade and a gas lamp which we hadn't even thought of.

We all kept to ourselves mostly, gathering around the fire towards dusk. Charl and Derrick were substantially older than Sally, Simon and I, but in the desert it didn't seem to matter. Like I say, we kept to ourselves, developed primal routines. We lived like that, not so much holiday makers as catharsis-mongers.

I woke one afternoon to the sound of a car passing our tent. We hadn't moved the cars since we had got there, so I was startled. Sally frowned at me through the nest of pillows and blankets we had made. I poked my head out to see Charl's Toyota Crusader charging down the dirt road which led out of the campsite. Derrick was standing with one hand on his hip and the other shading his eyes from the sun. He was looking for something in and around the Rock. Simon was nowhere to be seen.

"What's going on?" Sally pouted.

"Nothing," I said.

I crawled out of the tent and approached Derrick.

"What's going on?" I asked him.

"Not sure," he replied, his eyes still scanning the Rock. "Charl saw someone."

"Where's he gone?"

"Not sure. I looked up and he ducked behind a bush up there. Then we saw him running in that direction." Derrick pointed in the direction of the Crusader's dusty wake.

"Who, Charl?"

"No, the guy we saw. He was watching us."

"Where's Charl gone?"

"After him."

Derrick turned, nonchalant, and began to make his way back to the site. He was cooking something, probably sausages. Derrick had brought several kilograms of sausages with him. They were thick-skinned and tasted horrible and, like Charl's warm Black Labels, seemingly inexhaustible. Derrick fed us sausages in a way which reminded me of my mother. Charl protected his beers like my dad.

That night, we sat chewing a meal of boiled potatoes, sausages and soya mince. Derrick was telling a story about his ex-girlfriend who fell in love with a surfer who drowned in Jeffrey's Bay. The deceased's mates later claimed that she had shagged him to death because when he paddled out in the eight-foot swell, he was exhausted. When she heard this, Derrick's former lover, a real nympho by the sound of it, burnt all their boards at a beach party and was arrested.

It was a funny story and Derrick was trying to bring Charl into it, but Charl just nodded and munched his food. It was obvious that he was fuming about the incident earlier. Charl had returned to the campsite empty-handed and immediately gotten into an argument with Simon about wasting petrol chasing demons. I don't think Simon knew how close he had come to the truth then; about the demons, that is. Charl had spent the rest of that day drinking beer from an eyrie on the Rock.

When Derrick finished speaking we sat in silence.

"How did you know it wasn't me?" Simon ventured. His question was directed at his brother and we all knew what he was talking about. Charl stopped eating and licked his taut lips before answering.

"He had a beard," he said. "And hair."

"Probably a farm worker from around here," said Sally. "Or a local."

"What farm? What locals? There aren't even any other campsites around here!" Charl swigged his beer.

"He won't be back," I thought out loud.

"Think so?" Charl's sarcasm was thick, provocative.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," I parried.

"Exactly."

"If he needed help he would've asked."

"Exactly."

I resumed my meal. Charl had a point.

That night I writhed in the tent, watching the scrape of the moon on the rocks and hearing the skulk of the wind in the tent-flaps and distant crevasses. If there is someone out there, I told myself, he is long gone. Long gone.

Sally slept soundly beside me.

The following morning I was awake before even Derrick. The sun hadn't risen but the eastern horizon glowed ripely, dismissing cool stars. I climbed to the top of the same boulder that Charl had retreated to yesterday and breathed-in the Earth-curvature view. From there, the previous day's events seemed even more ludicrous. Charl was bored, I decided. He was creating monsters to deal with, just to deal with being out here. The man needed outside pressure to keep himself corked.

Then, as if by telekinesis - or a dream - I saw Charl step out of his tent and squat near the ashes of the fire. He was running his fingers through the sand, shoulders hunched. He seemed mesmerised by an insect, perhaps; ants. Then he began to waddle around the camp, bent over at the waist, as if chasing them with a magnifying glass. It looked like he was doing some sort of bizarre morning-exercise and I had to suppress a volcanic guffaw.

When I stood up he saw me and I waved.

"Morning," I called as I made my way down the boulder towards the camp. "What's up?"

"Footprints," he replied.

I knew what he was getting at. It was too early in the morning for it.

"We all wear shoes," I said.

"These are army boots," he pointed at the ground. "Standard issue."

I inspected the footprints. There were dozens of them, all identical.

"So what?"

"Look," he spat, "I know army boot prints when I see them. I spent three years of my life making them. I know army boots when I see them."

There was no point in arguing. Whether or not the footprints belonged to the person Charl and Derrick had spotted yesterday was no longer the issue. Charl's reaction was. Pathological, that is; obsessive.

"I'm sure you do," I said, measuring my tone carefully, and left it at that.

Derrick later confirmed Charl's theory and none of us were wearing shoes which matched the prints. And there *were* prints! They led from the fire to the boulder and back again. Things were tense from then on. Charl took another drive around the Rock, wasting more petrol, drinking more beer. By late

afternoon he was drunk. Sally wanted to leave and we had an argument, our first since we got there. I wasn't about to let the magic of the place be spoiled by paranoia, especially Charl's. Paranoia was a city thing and we were beyond that, all of it. We had water, food, each other.

"What's he gonna do," smirked Simon, "chop us all up with an axe?"

I went back to Sally and said: "What's he gonna do, chop us all up with an axe?"

She laughed and kissed me.

2

The man who called himself Willie Meyer stepped into the firelight late one night and nearly got himself killed. He couldn't have chosen a worse time or method to approach us. We were all ready to go to bed, Charl had drained his quota of beers and even Simon assumed a sudden, comical karate stance when the man appeared. Sally shrieked and I grabbed her. In a flash, Charl was on the man, holding his head to the ground with his knee. This is my first image of this man we found in the desert: violently lit by fire: his face contorted and pressed to the ground, his blood and saliva smeared in the packed sand, his matted beard sweeping the gravel. Charl held him there, grunting triumphantly. Both men's faces wore the same, twisted mask. I thought Charl was going to kill him, and I didn't do anything. I just stood there.

Derrick was shouting: "Okay, Charl, okay! Okay, man!"

The man was making guttural noises. His tongue was sticking out of his mouth. He was wearing clothes that were various shades of brown, though they had probably one day been different colours. When Charl relented, the man got onto one knee, panting, spitting, and spluttering. He tried to get up but Charl kicked his legs from beneath him and the man fell down again, his eyes rolling with pain.

"Okay, Charl!" It was me. Derrick slapped a hand on Charl's shoulder more as a restraint than a pacifier.

Charl held his prey a little more calmly now, but his face was red and his eyes aflame.

"*Wat's jou naam?*" Derrick, breathing heavily, addressed the captive in Afrikaans.

I looked at Simon, shaking my head. He was shaking his.

Simon said: "Robinson fucking Crusoe."

Charl was glaring at the man with such venom that I expected him to lash out at any moment. Derrick was repeating his question, and when the man told him that his name was Willie Meyer Charl pushed him over again.

"*Ja, en ek's Jannie focken Geldenhuys!*" Charl yelled, standing over him like a bear.

Sally looked up at me, frowning. However confused, I was struck by the absurdity of the situation in terms of the violence of Charl's reaction to that name. Anyone stupid enough to piss Charl off this much and then track him down to this part of the world deserved to be locked away for his own safety rather than ours or Charl's. Nevertheless, I began to feel guilty about our treatment of this lunatic. I felt that we were the aggressors. As Willie recovered and spoke to Derrick, I noticed that Charl was getting more

and more agitated, huffing and folding and re-folding his beefy arms. They were speaking in Afrikaans in which I am schooled but unlearned. I caught snatches of their conversation but they made no real sense to me. It was heavily loaded with an unfamiliar argot. It was the language of the desert. Derrick seemed increasingly relaxed, doing most of the talking, even chuckling to himself occasionally. Charl intervened less and less as Derrick and the man developed an oblique rapport.

"He's lost it completely," Derrick turned to us at length. "Thinks he's Willie Meyer."

Willie Meyer was no longer responding. He sat there, a trapped animal, casting glances at Charl who was grinning maliciously and nodding.

Derrick said: "He's *bosbevok*. Christ."

"That's for sure," hooted Charl. "That's for bloody fucken sure."

"Okay then" I said. "Party's over. Let's go."

Willie Meyer could stay there, for all I cared. He could have it all. Sorry, buster. Didn't mean to camp in your back yard. Nice view, though. Take my card. Better yet, e-mail me. Better yet; my people will e-mail your people...

"Maybe he came to us for help," said Sally. It was the first time she had spoken.

Charl guffawed.

"This man belongs in Falconberg," I said. "We can't help him, Kitten. Lithium, perhaps, not us..."

"For fuck's sake push," Sally turned on me.

"Well he's not getting there in my car."

"So you're just going to leave him here?"

"HEY!" It was Charl. Sally and I turned to him. I braced myself.

"Who says we're going anywhere?" said Charl.

"Who says we're staying?" I replied.

"Hold on," Simon intervened. "I say we let him go. He's scared enough as it is. He's harmless."

"Well then what's he stalking us for?" This was, I realised as the words left my mouth, the million dollar question.

"He wants to know where the rest of the platoon is," chortled Charl.

Derrick nodded. "He wants to know if we've received air cover yet," he smiled, tossing another branch on the fire. Then he and Charl were laughing hysterically, as if the whole thing was suddenly a big fat private joke. Hardy bloody har, I thought.

I turned to Sally. "We're leaving," I said.

As everyone responded to this at the same time, Willie Meyer stood up and hobbled away. No one stopped him, not even Charl. We watched him disappear into the darkness whence he came with our mouths open.

No one spoke.

One by one, we went to bed.

"There must be water in these Rocks," Sally whispered in the tent, half-asleep.

The following morning we found our car tyres slashed. All of them. All eight. And no-one had heard a thing. Charl paced up and down, cursing savagely under his breath.

"Stupid stupid," he muttered, "fuck fuck fuck."

I was just as furious. I wanted to hunt this loon down and kill him. The only one who wasn't completely freaked out was Simon, who sat cross-legged beneath a cactus some way from us. His eyes were closed and his breathing was deep and steady.

I turned on him, despising his serenity.

"What are you gonna do," I snarled, "levitate to safety?"

He ignored me, which irritated me even more. I could see his pupils moving beneath his lids.

"Hey, Gautama. It's time for a fucking miracle!"

I turned on my heel and steamed away from him. I found Derrick eating a sausage in the shade of an awning he'd constructed. I joined him.

"Well?" I sighed.

"That crazy fucking bastard," Derrick shook his head. "He's still fighting the bloody war, man."

"What war?"

Derrick stopped chewing. He looked at me, raised one eyebrow, swallowed.

"Do you know who Willie Meyer is?" he asked. I assumed the question was rhetorical.

"Some psycho hobo villain on ancient TV who Charl hates?" I honestly thought it was a fair-enough guess.

Derrick nearly choked on his next mouthful of food.

"You really don't know?" he managed eventually.

I stared blankly enough to get the following response:

"Major General Willie Meyer was the General Officer Commanding of the South West African Territory Force. One of the leading generals in the Angolan War. A real hothead. A fucking psycho indeed. Meyer wanted to take Luanda, Angola's capital, and according to some he was capable of it. He had the military capability. But the politicians held him back. You see, Angola was our Viet Nam. We couldn't admit that we were actually *in* Angola so we had to crawl around on the ground and hide from the Angolan's air-strikes behind thorn-bushes. For ten years we slid under their flak on our bellies like snakes because of the fucking politicians and their 'considerations', while UNITA came out looking like a super-human army. By 1988 Meyer had had enough. He started shelling the shit out of an Angolan force stronghold called Cuito Cuanavale. I'm telling you, man, he tore the crap out of it. It was full blown war." Derrick paused for the first time. "Charl was there."

"What happened?"

"No-one knows. When the dust had settled, both teams thought they'd won. I suppose they couldn't gather enough matching body parts to count the casualties properly. I met Charl in a hospital just after that. We were in different wards. I needed stitches after falling off a jeep driving around Pretoria with some girl, drunk. Charl needed psychiatric treatment."

"He still does," I muttered.

Derrick's tone hardened: "Do you know what a reccie is?"

Reccie: the kind of speeds to destruction from gullet to tip of tongue. Wreckie.

I said: "Sounds familiar."

"Charl was a reccie, a reconnaissance *troep*. Biggest bunch of lunatics on the force. You had to volunteer. Charl was one of them and let me tell you right now he's seen shit that no man can forget. You remember that."

I shifted uncomfortably. Simon and I were at school together and I remember us getting our conscription papers the year they ended conscription. South African males born before 1974 were conscripted to do a minimum of two years military service. There is a cultural rift there, in our society, a chasm. A political thing. They fought in the war, most of them. They went to Angola, we didn't. We're the hippies, they're the shell-shocked racists.

"Listen, Paul," Derrick continued, his voice softer, "Charl hates Willie Meyer. I mean the general and this nut we've found."

"This nut who found us."

"Whatever. Charl blames the general for what happened in Cuito, and he recognises *himself* in the crazy guy, and it's too harsh a reflection. That's what's eating him."

We sat in silence for a while, I absorbing what I'd just been told.

"Let's get out of here," I said. I didn't want to entertain eventualities. "Let's just go."

3

We drove until the rubber flapped off the rims of the front tyres. The sharp bare metal of the rims dug into the packed sand of the road and Charl's Crusader ground to a halt two hundred meters from the capsite. We set out tents up again and that night began to discuss the rationing of the water.

4

The next day we scoured the Rock, looking for either Willie Meyer or his water supply. We found nothing. Then Sally suggested that he lived in one of the other Rocks, maybe a larger one and we resolved to hike to the nearest one the following day. Derrick insisted that Charl stay with Sally to protect her and guard the camp. Surprisingly, grudgingly, he agreed. I was a little worried about leaving Sally on her own with Charl in the psychological condition he was in, but Sally assured me that it was the best thing. "What if you found him?" she suggested. She was right; Charl could do more harm than good on the expedition.

Simon, Derrick and I left early in the morning and reached the closest Rock just as the sun was flexing its powerful rays towards midday. We scouted around for a short while, but to no avail. The Rock was

similar to ours but less creased and vegetated. As we squat in a shallow, shady cave, savouring slow sips of water from Derrick's canteen, Simon rose and pointed to the peak on our left.

A thin plume of smoke, just visible, rose from it.

"Bingo!" I whooped.

"If we leave straight away he might spot us," reasoned Derrick.

"Maybe he already has," said Simon.

To be safe, we waited until sunset, then set off in the direction of this next Rock. We moved quickly, smoothly, with renewed energy. It occurred to me that we were like soldiers fighting a war that had ended ten years ago, one which should have passed me by and which I wanted nothing to do with. Yet I was acting on a survival instinct. Like a deployed soldier, it was too late; I was marching.

By the time we reached the Rock, it was silhouetted by stars. The smoke had disappeared when we were half way there so we circumvented the Rock until we caught sight of a flickering light. "Fire," said Derrick. We would step into his life just as he had stepped into ours. "This means stop," said Derrick, holding his fist in the air. "Now shut up, and move." The three of us approached cautiously.

I began to discern a brown tent as we got closer. It was an army tent. The fire was low, just the glow of a few embers. Willie Meyer was nowhere to be seen. He must be in the tent, I thought, hiding with a gun. My testicles were up in my abdomen by this stage. I tapped Derrick on the shoulder and pointed at the tent. Simon shrugged, strode up to the tent, and opened it. There was no-one there.

"He's not here," Derrick's voice echoed off the Rock.

Looking around, I shivered. I could tell that the abode was permanent and that it had been occupied for quite some by the way that man-made objects like sheets of metal and material had virtually merged in time and nature's gradual, entropic osmosis. Forks cleaving into the Rock face served as holds for long pieces of thin, strong rope across which twigs and brush were thatched. A corrugated sheet of metal, covered in sand, jutted out of the ground at an angle to form what looked like a crude and shallow bomb-shelter. Mysterious piles of rocks were assembled here and there. There was a semi-organic crudity to the arrangement.

"There must be water around here somewhere," said Simon, walking to the Rock.

"We should stick together," I hissed. "He might be watching us. This place makes my skin crawl."

"Hey," shouted Derrick. "HEY!"

He was crouching over a brown metal box with knobs and dials on it. Then I saw the antennae. A radio! Derrick flicked a knob and it crackled to life, making us all jump, then laugh. The white noise was the sound of a cool tropical waterfall to my ears. We surrounded the instrument like three wise men huddling over an infant messiah.

"Can you work this thing?" I asked Derrick.

"Used to," he scratched the long stubble on his chin. "Not my forte. I know Charl still does."

We twiddled with the rig for a while, but Derrick only spoke to static. His "Mayday. Mayday." was answered by a constant crackling fizz.

"Fuck," he conceded eventually, switching it off. "No go."

In the sudden, menacing silence, I imagined Willie Meyer watching us from a crack in the Rock, battered lips twisted, vengefully planning his ambush.

"Let's go back," I said, but I knew that it was impossible. We couldn't even see where we would be headed. We were stuck there till daybreak, suddenly very vulnerable. We took blankets from the tent and stoked the fire, taking turns at the watch, but none of us slept. We could feel his eyes on us like you can hear a mosquito from across a large room: menacing, faint, intent.

It was actually dark when we set off for the Rock. We took the radio with us, taking turns to carry. We knew the general direction and went by that until the horizon greyed and we could begin to make out its blot in our vision. We corrected our course slightly and continued. As we drew nearer to what was definitely our Rock, we sped up.

As came around the Rock and spotted our campsite, everyone relaxed. I could see Charl sitting in the shade of a boulder. Not surprisingly, he lay slumped in a huge heap of beer cans. I went to the tent to look for Sally while Derrick and Simon tried to rouse Charl. As I opened the flap of the tent, Sally sprang up to me and flung her arms around my neck. She was crying. My head spun.

"What did he do to you?" I choked on my own words. "What did he do?"

"Not me," she was saying. She was pointing. That's when I saw it. Willie Meyer was tied to the base of the tree nearest the fire, his arms, tied behind him, wrapped around the trunk. Derrick was already crouched over the form, Simon, agape, behind him. Charl was fast asleep.

"He was torturing him," sobbed Sally, "all night last night. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing I could do. Nothing."

Willie Meyer was a mess. His face was pulp and one bare foot sported toes which protruded in sickening angles. Derrick put his hand to Willie Meyer's bruised neck and battered mouth, then looked up at us. I'd never seen Derrick look so aghast.

He said: "He's dead."

5

The few hours we spent in the desert waiting for Charl to sober up were the most formative of my life. Each of us kept to ourselves. Even Sally and I went our separate ways, I out into the nothingness to burn my thoughts there, she in a foetal position in the tent. For some reason, my rage toward Charl had been replaced by a bewildered fear. Things had happened which I didn't want to understand.

I walked around the Rock and by the time I got back to the site, thirsty and hungry, I saw Charl speaking into the radio next to the open bonnet of the Crusader. The radio was plugged into the car's battery and contact had been made. He had tuned into an airport just outside Walvis Bay. Two hours later a tiny rescue plane landed on a fairly straight strip of road beyond the Rock and taxied towards us. We were saved.

We explained the slashed tyres by blaming it on Charl's drunken fit of anger. Charl told them that he took a knife to the wheels when we had insisted on going home. The policeman filled out the report, clicking his tongue and shaking his head like an old woman.

I never asked what became of the body. To my knowledge it still lies there, in the desert, perhaps not the last casualty of the Angolan War but certainly one of the most tragic. His killer still sends my best friend Christmas greetings from Europe. I wrote one letter to Derrick, not expecting a reply and not receiving one.

To this day, Simon still insists that he wants to go back to the desert. I will not be joining him. I am too afraid that instead of finding that state of purity which the place evokes I will only re-discover that part of me which I thought I had left behind.

No, I could never go back to the desert. It belongs to Willie Meyer, and I would be there despite it.

Non-Fiction

Look, I want to... I *need* to start off by apologizing. See, I'm the wrong person to be telling this story. I am, in truth, the wrong guy for the job. Perhaps I knew this long before I could admit it to myself (money blinds us, glory, delusions of significance), but now it is too late. So here I am. I'm all you've got; you're all I've got. And somewhere in between lies the text, and beyond that, far, far past it, despite you or I or even Franz van Zyl's dying words, lies the truth. The Truth. It has become my purgatory to make sure it doesn't follow him into the hermetic crust of the Great Karoo. Even if that's where it belongs: whence it came.

Ah Christ, how'd I get myself into this?

I mean, I'm no *journalist*. I mean: I don't 'do' non-fiction. I don't even *like* non-fiction. I am as much a *journalist* as Bukowski was an *au pair*. I write poems, poems, the odd short story. Science fiction; lyric. Not this shit. Not this serious stuff, man.

For fuck's sake...

Okay. Listen: here it is: some two months ago, I broke up with my girlfriend, moved house blindly, too quickly, and found myself living in a duplex in a deeply southern suburb next to a clique of skew-peak-cap-uniformed, crack-smoking, pistol-waving, bona fide gangsters. By 'next to' I mean the onion-skin veil of a layer of bricks. The Cowboys, they called themselves. At first, all I felt towards them was a mild irritation and once made the mistake of jocularly pointing my hands like guns from the hip, pow pow, as I was bouncing up the stairs to the front door. This, I think, led them to believe that I wasn't taking them seriously enough. By 'seriously enough' I mean the movie-steeped notion, the Hollywood-concept of 'gangster' as the drug-percolated hermeneutics of these two-bit hoods would allow. What they demanded, I suppose retrospectively, was respect.

That evening three of them, Steady Freddy, Wikkell Spies and a stocky youth with only one eye who they called 'Bliksem', invited themselves into my lounge and began waving guns and knives around. "Want to buy one?" demanded Bliksem. "We have lots." They laughed, all the harder for my obvious discomfort.

"The last two guys who lived here phoned the police. You know what I'm saying..." said Steady Freddy, seriously. Seriously enough. I knew what they were saying. These guys were living in a Hollywood movie. I had to play along. When your life depends on it, it's easy.

Now, my ex-girlfriends cousin and a good friend of mine, Trevor, (who was always punting journalism to me in Guinness-fuelled torpedo-with-the-wind fashion during the rugby) had recently begun publishing an alternative/underground magazine. Dead keen on gangsters, he was, ex-in-law, friend and editor, Trev; veritably slaverling for a gangster feature for the mag.

"Interview them," Trevor pleaded, with tears in his eyes, when he heard that I was on quasi-intimate terms with a nest of the best. "Just one."

"S'perfect," he'd leer over his beer.

Do it yourself, I told him. You know them, countered he. I'll introduce you, I parried.

"I'll payou," slurred Trev.

“Pay me?”

So it came about that one afternoon I sat down with Frederick Mathiesen, alias Steady Freddy, the most eloquent of the motley lot, also the one I knew best, fed him beers, and got some war stories on micro-cassette. It was easy. I didn't tell him the tape recorder was in my pocket. I *did* mention that it was an interview. Whatever. I mean you know how it is nowadays. In these times of yellow journalism what you end up with is proportionately chartreuse truth.

The very next day I received a telephone call from *Wikkel*, telling me that Steady took a bullet in the neck in the toilet of a bar and they can't find the body. I put the phone down, smoked a cigarette. As I leaned to put it out in the ashtray I heard three loud pops and a window in the kitchen exploded. A Coke bottle was lying smashed in a puddle of petrol on the tiles, the sodden wick lying extinguished at my feet. I ran to the toilet and hid there for some time.

It was in there - in the toilet - that it happened. Suddenly, as if by some inexorable capitalist instinct, some semi-fraudulent fiscal epiphany, I realized what prodigious a vein of hype I was sitting on: a scoop interview with a *deceased* (gloriously, conveniently deceased) paragon of urban conflict - attempted assassination - read my lips...P A T H O S. Big time. Huge. CNN. I phoned Trevor.

Trevor did a little jig in his office, his beer-belly bouncing around his desk, and the next thing I know I'm the very public eye of a storm of concerned politicians and emotional citizens. I'm the guy who 'discovered' Steady Freddy Mathiesen.

Meta-hype, piles of it... martyrdom...

Freddy just wanted you...wanted South Africa, to know...

The medium is the money, if you know what to say, and I told them what they wanted to hear. Money began pouring into my bank account from sources innumerable and mysterious. I didn't even have to pay rent during this time: I was living with Trevor. I was on TV and the radio. I was offered glamorous interview slots, deifying magazine profiles, cushy columns, bought white-wine-lunch by Democratic Party representatives. I was well and truly covered.

After my third television appearance, after I'd been quoted in most of the country's papers, next to his mother, the police, and the local Premier, I had my Uncle Morgan phoning me and asking me to work for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That's right: the TR-fucking-C.

Now, the last time I'd spoken more than two consecutive words to Uncle Morgan was my barmitzvah, when he gave me a beefy check and a patronizing pat on the yarmulka. Now he's telling me that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission needed a 'temporary representative' for a 'minor' job 'gathering evidence'. The TRC, said Uncle Morgan, needed me. Justice needed me, Truth. So said uncle Morgan. I should have known then that I wasn't up to it. I don't do Truth. I can barely stand it at the best of times.

“What does it involve?” I asked Uncle Morgan over the phone.

“Travel...” he began, and ended by quoting a sum of money that made me salivate, literally, physiologically.

I told him I would think about it, then put the phone down, then phoned Trevor.

“Trevor,” I said, “I'm going to work for the TR-fucking-C.”

He said: "There's a story in this."

Mine was a utopian youth, sheltered but replete. I have always been aware of this, and always known that 'real life' was, by proxy more than genuine disaster, naturally imminent. And yet I also thought I could control my inevitable disillusionment, somehow, somehow pilot my epiphanic descent. But by the time I slid Uncle Morgan's gleaming beemer through the gates of *Welbeloofden*, I was in it. And you can't control it once you're *in* it, because you *are* it. Non-fiction had caught up with me. Like a fateful, tasteless political joke. Like a bad thing waiting to happen. I could tell, from the very beginning, from the strange sensation in the pit of my throat as I maneuvered that shiny tube of a vehicle to an angular halt, that this wasn't going to be like Steady Freddy. No. I could sense, in my heart more than my head, that this was going to be the opposite thing.

This was my first impression of *Welbeloofden*: through the tinted glaze of the BMW's windscreen: a crumbling, dust-caked farmhouse nestled in a hollow dip at the base of a squat wide koppie, imbued with patches of struggling trees and defiant cacti. The land around it is arid, a cranial oblivion of long-dry river beds, and the drive up to the house involves an endless half-hour of corrugated dirt road. Desert-stretched kilometers of this, then there it stands, despite the moonscape: *Welbeloofden*. 'Well-promised'.

The front of the house extended into a wide porch upon which a woman stood and watched my arrival. Shirking the ludicrous notion that she had been waiting for me there like that since sunrise and suppressing the nervous reeling of my gut, I waved at her. If she saw me, she did not wave back. Instead she turned on her heel and went inside. I killed the engine and my half-finished cigarette, got out, stretched. By the time I lowered my arms a big man was loping towards me. He was shadowed by the woman, who was peering over the heaving beef of his shoulder. They approached like careful emissaries. I lifted my shades over my forehead.

"Arno van Zyl," his hand clamped mine, calluses pressing into the sweaty softness of my palm. "This is my wife, Anna. How are you? How was the drive?" His accent was guttural, Teutonic. He rolled his r's from behind his gullet, rolled them like the horizon. He spoke casually enough, however, to convince me of the relative fluency of his English. I had been wondering about this, wondering why they hadn't sent an Afrikaans-speaking 'representative.' Why some Jewish private school impresario?

Semiotics? PC?

"Fine," I replied, guardedly. "Fine, thanks."

Nepotism. Vanity. Greed.

"You're early," sang Anna. "It is a long drive from Johannesburg."

I could tell that they were both shocked at how young I was. The TRC connotes graying suits and politicians. Nevertheless, I wasn't going to let them into the logistics of my presence there. Perhaps I shouldn't have dressed down.

"I left early," I lied. I drove fast. The beemer drove fast, devouring the long, straight stretches of highway. I pushed it. It wasn't my car so I pushed it. "I hope it's not an inconvenience."

Arno van Zyl grunted in polite dissent and his wife seemed to warm immediately to my platitudes. She was a handsome though chinless young woman with short, curly, black hair and a cocktail sausage of a protruding lower lip. I had no luggage, but Arno insisted on carrying my overnight bag inside for me anyway. It seemed important, at the time, that I allowed him this, this gesture. The whole thing felt stiff and terribly, rurally urbane. Ceremonial. I was being treated like the one thing I despise more than anything in this world: a bureaucrat. I could feel Anna's eyes on the back of my head as her husband led me into the house. In the silence of the Karoo afternoon we were a punctilious procession, I, the presumed politician, sandwiched between them as we went inside.

Inside it was as dank and gloomy as it was hot and arid outdoors. The furniture was a mixture of kitsch-paraphernalia-crammed, polish-blackened, heavy antiques, and crochet-covered, cheap, plastic modernities. A cord-throttled fax-machine squatted protectively next to a turn-dial telephone on top of a turn-of-the-century rocking-chair. An ancient PC gathered dust on an oak desk near a heavily curtained bay window. Apart from a mess of papers near the phone and on the desk, the living room was very neat, the armies of bronze and porcelain statuettes meticulously polished and arranged.

Arno led me down a gloomy corridor to a super-neat and deeply gloomy guest room. As soon as Anna crossed the threshold behind me she began to offer comestibles and refreshments. At first I declined, my stomach still being full of laconic road-burger and travel-snacks and proverbial winged insects, but she persisted until I agreed to a token glass of homemade paw-paw juice. All this time Arno stood with his hands on his hips and nodded at me. I could only nod back. The whole time that Anna was fetching the juice we just stood and nodded at each other, huffing and grunting. Neither of us wished to hazard further small-talk, nor initiate any serious discussion quite yet. So we stood there, nodding, puffing, in the gloom, until Anna returned with the juice, which she watched me drink as if I were the judge in a paw-paw juice competition.

I smacked my lips. I moaned in appreciation. I made a real meal of it. Arno nodded. Anna beamed. I stood there with an empty glass in my hand and wondered how to make these people go away for now.

"Is Franz van Zyl about?" I lobbed, quasi-casual. They stiffened.

Arno cleared his throat and said: "My father is... My father does not leave his room."

"When will I be able to see him?" I probed.

"He is sleeping," said Anna, looking at her husband. "You can talk to him later. I hope you are not in a hurry."

I said I wasn't, then regretted it.

"Bit tired," I hammed, squinting.

They took the hint.

Anna said something in Afrikaans on her way out that I didn't quite catch.

"Thanks," I said.

When Arno closed the door behind him, I collapsed on the bed and asked myself whether the money'd be worth it, whether it could. I lay there like that for a long time, breathing-in the torpid gloom, unable to find myself, puppet-masterless, strangely debilitated by their close absence. I had brought the latest copy of Trevor's magazine with me to read, but couldn't bring myself to move

towards it. I closed my eyes and saw Uncle Morgan handing me the keys to the car. I sat up, shook my head like a wet dog.

At length, I opened the door and peered down the dim length of the corridor. At the far end was the kitchen. Just before that, to the left - the lounge. To my right, the corridor sported three closed doors, three slabs of deeper darkness in the dark. I made my way towards the lighter end of the tunnel.

As I stepped into the sheet of light that was the lounge, I saw the silhouette of a man sitting in an armchair with his back towards me. This must be Franz van Zyl, I thought, but as I approached he turned in his chair and I saw that he was relatively young, too young to be Franz van Zyl, with a striking resemblance to Arno. He had the same podgy, puerile features and although he was unmistakably older than Arno, his face was less weathered, rosier. When he saw me his eyes narrowed. He stood up. He was wearing a Pierre Cardin shirt with the sleeves rolled up and black pants.

"Hi," I said, hand outstretched. "Grant Skimwitz."

The man's lips pursed, his features warping into a look of resigned repugnance. It was the first time in my life when I had stuck my hand out to be shaken and retracted the gesture unconsummated.

"I know who you are," he said, not looking at me.

"I'm here to see Franz van Zyl," I tried to steel my voice, but the words came out almost plaintively, so I left out the 'on behalf of the TRC' bit.

"I know why you're here."

He barked the words accusingly as though I were a chronic liar. My dry lips froze, hitched over my dry teeth. Anna came in, wiping her hands on a dish-cloth. She cawed when she saw me and smiled.

"Supper is nearly ready," she said. Then, motioning towards the man: "Saul..." but he strode past me and was gone. Anna and I watched him go.

"That is Saul, my brother-in-law," explained Anna in a low voice. "He is upset about his father."

I cocked my head and looked at my feet.

"When will..."

"Supper is nearly ready," she repeated, quickly, and went back to the kitchen.

I crossed the lounge, stepping out of a sliding door onto a back porch. There was a table set with hanging cutlery, a salad bowl and an enormous pitcher of paw-paw juice. Beyond the patio was a flattened, brown yard, and, beyond that, a koppie speckled with aloes and clumps of brush. I was about to head off in that direction to walk off my indignation when I heard the front door open loudly and turned to see Arno van Zyl and a black man dressed what looked like a municipal orange overall entering the lounge. Arno was wearing a sweat-stained collared T-shirt, soiled brown slacks, and leather *velskoene*. When he saw me, he said something to the black man, who nodded and left, then approached me, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Hungry?" Arno boomed.

I forced a smile. "Mmmm..."

"Rested?"

"Yep."

"Did you meet my brother?"

"Yes," I said. "He seemed upset."

"Saul," he said, "Saul is always upset."

Ten minutes later, Arno, Anna, Saul and I were seated at the table. Arno gave me a meaningful look, raised his eyebrows at Saul, took Anna's hand, bowed his head and muttered a prayer in Afrikaans. Saul pursed his lips when Anna said amen. Supper was a tight-lipped affair with an English-speaking stranger at the table, and whereas I tried to camouflage my awkwardness with hunger, I could sense that my presence was being - quietly, tensely - dealt with.

Arno was relating a story about an incident on the farm that day. Apparently the black man who had entered the house with him earlier, Bartus, had been a faithful servant of the family for several years because Anna kept interrupting Arno's technically detailed description of water-pump repairs with questions about Bartus' pregnant wife. I appreciated the fact that Arno was trying to diffuse the hostility which seemed to emanate from Saul like a tide of hot silence. I thought he was doing well until Saul put his elbows on the table and said:

"My father wanted to send a tape. Why was that not enough?"

"Didn't they explain it to you?" I said.

"They told us something about sending you," pitched Arno. "I forgot what."

"Well," I began, "for some reason... Despite the... Although I'm only here to *make* a tape, the ethics of the situation require my presence here during his statement... during the - uh, taping. Look, I'm just here because the TRC needs someone in his physical presence while the tape's made. It's jurisprudence. Then I take this tape back to Johannesburg and hand it on to Archbishop Tutu. That's all. That's all I've been asked to do. My presence here is..."

"Unnecessary," concluded Saul.

"Symbolic," I babbled.

"Why didn't they send an Afrikaans speaker?" he was all over me. Questions I hadn't answered for myself yet.

"I think the real reason why David is here," growled Arno, eyeing his brother formidably, "is that Pa isn't healthy enough to go to Cape Town or Johannesburg by himself."

"...a courier, really," but no-one was listening to me. The two brothers' eyes were locked across the table.

Saul spoke first.

"Pa's dying," he said. "He should be left in peace."

"*Pa't hom geroep!*" Arno shouted. He pointed at me. "*Hy't vir hom geroep.*"

Anna said: "Arno. Saul."

She stood up. Saul's lips twitched. He got up and slapped his napkin onto his plate. He looked at me and said:

"My father doesn't want you here."

He waited for a response but I couldn't give one, so he snorted and disappeared into the corridor's maw like a dark wraith.

"I'm sorry," Arno's voice came at me from a distance. "We haven't seen Saul for seven years. Our father doesn't have much time left."

"Not the best circumstances to reacquaint yourselves," I said.

He said, "We were never very close. Saul always had his eyes on the horizon. For me, the land was always the most important thing. It was always the most important thing to my father also. Listen," his eyes burned, "I don't care about this TRC business. I think it... It could be a good thing, it could be a bad thing. It doesn't matter to me. But if they try to take our land from us..."

I was glad that he didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to.

"Look," he said. He went to an ancient drawer chest and unlocked one of the drawers with a tiny black key. He took out a plastic folder and brought it to me as though he were holding the Holy Infant. I reached for it but he drew it back; it was on display, not offer.

"This is the deed to *Welbeloofden*," he said. "This document is one hundred and three years old."

I nodded at it. Arno put it back in the drawer and locked it. Night had settled, cooling the air which was already viscid with the tension in the house.

"I don't know why my father asked you to come here," said Arno. "I want you to know that."

"Do you want to know?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"*Welbeloofden*. The land is all that matters to me," he said. His eyes wrinkled slightly. "What matters to you?" he asked.

I raised my eyebrows and shrugged.

"It's the truth you want," said Arno van Zyl. "You think that the truth will save this country from its past. Maybe it will. I don't know. Do you?"

"No."

I nodded; he nodded. We sat there, nodding the negative to profundity between us, but what neither of us knew then was that, in truth, I didn't care about this man's dying father's truth, his testimony. All that mattered to me, all that really mattered to me was getting his last gasp on tape and getting the hell out of there. I wanted the cheque. If anything, I felt that Saul was right. Franz van Zyl should be left in peace. But if he were, I wouldn't be here, chasing ten grand and a government-stamp reference for my CV. But there I sat, feeling like some deficient diplomat.

I said: "I'd like to see him now, if that's alright?"

It seemed as though I'd been in this place for years. As Arno led me into the darkness of the corridor that night, I felt almost accustomed to its menacing shadow. I surrendered my sight willingly - gratefully. I could feel the weight of the tape recorder in my pocket and I stuck my hand in to fidget with it in anticipation. I couldn't see anything ahead of me, but at one stage, I turned around and saw that we had only come a short way down the corridor. Turning back into the darkness, moving slowly, blind, benighted, submarine, antennae-arms pushing the air, that short distance became - once again - an infinity of potential shapes and disasters. I followed Arno by sound and faith. After what seemed like an impossible time and distance, I heard Arno stop. I bumped into him, the slapstick action making us

both jump. I heard soft knock, a door opening, saw a gray evolve out of the nothingness to my left. We went inside.

At the foot of the bed, Saul sat hunched over hands clasped so tightly in his lap that the fingers had bent themselves into a knot. He watched us enter from the corners of his eyes. He was facing a large bed on which Franz van Zyl lay. The old man's head rolled towards us when we came in, but the eyes only made it to a point a meter or so above our heads. His face was a mask of gray hair through which two black marble eyes waned in their craters.

"Pa," said Arno, "*die man is hier.*"

"Grant Skimwitz," I said softly.

Franz van Zyl waved a mitten-like hand in my direction and said something indiscernible, at which Saul quickly, mechanically, stood up and left the room. The old man spoke again but I couldn't understand what he was saying.

"My father says you must set up the taping machine and leave it here with me," said Arno. He sounded confused at what he was translating.

"But the whole point of my being here is to... be here," I said.

Arno said something to the old man, who didn't speak until Arno began to repeat what he had said. The old man shifted himself up on his pillows with what seemed like more patience than effort and fixed me with a gaze that stunned me with its clouded animosity.

"Who are you?" asked the sun-starched sheet of his white beard, while the eyes held me in centripetal awe.

"Grant Skimwitz," I replied. "I was ordered by my superiors to be in your physical presence while the testimony is given."

The old man shook his head. He said something to Arno in Afrikaans. When he finished speaking, Arno turned to me.

"Leave the tape recorder with me," Arno said. "Please. I will give you the tape afterwards."

I could have argued with him. I should have. But something inside me was balked. What did it matter whether it was me or Arno in the room? What qualified me over him? The more I rationalized, the better it seemed that it be Arno rather than some stranger who hears what the old man has to say.

"You should trust me," said Arno.

I gave him the tape recorder.

"This is the record button, this is the mike," I indicated. "Hold it close to him."

I turned the record levels all the way up and left the room. I was seething, humiliated. I paced around the lounge. All this officious pomp, only to be overwhelmed by the inexplicable emotional undercurrents of an invalid and a farmer! And I wasn't as bitter with them as I was with the bureaucracy which got me there. Boy, was I the pawn. Boy, was I ever a superfluity. If I ever worked for the government again it would be to topple the system from the inside...

I caught sight of Anna. She was pacing from the kitchen to the porch with a thumbnail in her teeth. Saul was with her. When she saw me, she hurried over and asked in a crackling voice where Arno was. I told her he was with his father.

"Oh no," she was suddenly trembling, "*nee nee nee...*"

"It doesn't matter," I said to her. "It's just red tape. Just don't tell anyone."

"No," she said, "you don't understand. There is something that Arno doesn't know. There is something he should *never* know." She paused. I stared. "Franz went mad," said Anna.

Saul shot her a scathing look.

"Ma died..." He muttered.

"It was more than that," she continued. "He was always such a... liberal that over the past few years that as apartheid and all that died, we all expected him to be happy about it. But for some reason, he became very quiet. Arno took over the affairs of the farm. When Liza - his wife - died, Franz stopped eating or going outside. He gave up. But it was more than grief or mourning. Saul and I both know this. We always did, but neither of us could tell Arno."

"I don't understand." I was trying hard to.

Anna continued, with Saul half-listening, half-watching me.

"Joost van Zyl, Franz's father, Arno and Saul's grandfather, was a terrible man. There was a tribe of Griquas living on the land here, living peacefully even next to the white settlers, even after South Africa became a state. When Joost van Zyl drove them away - just him and his gun against a whole tribe - nobody said or did anything but the van Zyl's gained a reputation that would stay with them until Franz van Zyl took over the farm. Franz was a piece-loving man who wanted to become a priest but was forced to become a *boer* by his father and his wife. Nevertheless, *Welbeloofden* flourished under his leadership. When Saul and Arno were just boys, a man, a black man, a Griqua who had studied the records and history of this land, came to *Welbeloofden*. He accused Franz of being a murderer and challenged him to see a deed to the land. Rumour had it that Franz van Zyl forged the deed and showed it to the man, who disappeared and never came back. This was a rumour. Yesterday, Saul and I found out that the rumour was true."

Saul and Anna waited for me to say something. I didn't.

Saul said: "Last night, after supper, I asked my father what the matter was. I demanded to know. He told me. He told me that this land wasn't ours any more, that it never was; that without a deed we are nothing but impostors. Bullies. My father wants to give *Welbeloofden* back. He said to me: 'The deed is a forgery. Tell everyone.' He knows how much that means to Arno."

We were all silent for a long time. As the implications of what had been said sank in, Anna said: "He never told me or Arno. We never knew." She swallowed the last part of her statement by putting a hand to her mouth. "Franz was always... strange. He was always an outsider in his community, after taking over the farm he stopped going to church. He was always alone because he never cared what anybody thought about him. He..."

Anna's face dropped. I saw Arno emerge from the blackness of the corridor and step into the muted light of the lounge. All turned to face him. He was expressionless. He walked over to me and offered me the tape recorder, which I took, then went back to the corridor and was gone. Anna followed him. Saul and I sat in the lounge and said nothing, the tape recorder cooling slowly in my hands.

The next morning, Arno and Anna were in the kitchen, drinking coffee, heavy-lidded. Anna had her hand on her husband's forearm. When I came in Anna glanced at the overnight bag I was carrying, while Arno continued to stare blankly into space in front of him.

"Coffee?" Anna offered.

"Please."

"You got what you came for," said Arno.

The way he said it, as if he was talking to his own broken heart, produced a tremendous welling of pity in me.

Having spent a sleepless night wrestling with the desire to wake him up and tell him this, I said: "Arno, no-one has to know. I can erase the tape and no-one has to know."

I knew that erasing the tape would have made no difference to the TRC, who could never understand its true significance. But it would make all the symbolic difference in the world to this man.

He said: "You do your job. It's the right thing."

"It's not *right*, Arno," said Anna.

"It's the right thing!" he raised a hand in the air. "Pa wants it that way."

"Does it really matter?" I asked him. "Just like it mattered that *I* tape your father's testimony? The whole aim of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is to hear apartheid-era crimes and grant amnesty in exchange for... the truth. What if, in gathering that truth, they change it? There are no absolutes, ever. Arno, you are a good man and a good farmer and so was your father. As far as I know, your father's testimony doesn't even fall under their jurisdiction. It's ancient history. If you want to go back far enough you can blame it all on the guy who invented the first god-damned sail.

"Arno," I said, "do you want me to erase the tape?"

"Come with me."

Arno led me out of the kitchen, through the sliding doors to the flat clearing beyond. I walked behind him as we strode into wash of sunlight, blinded.

"Look at that," he said, pointing out toward the horizon. "What do you see?"

I tried to find what he was indicating, sought signs of agriculture and irrigation, but all I could see was the bleak expanse of the land.

"It's your land," I said, ingratiating.

"No," he said. "What do you see?"

I shrugged. Moonscape.

"Exactly," he said, interpreting my silence. "Nothing. There is nothing here. This is not *farmland*." He scraped the ground with the toe of his boot. "This is gravel. Over there," he pointed to the base of a rocky hillock, "on the other side of that koppie, Bartus and Willem Pietersen and their families live on the edge of a small erf. I tell you it's the lushest piece of land in the whole Karoo. My father moved them there on the day of my grandfather's funeral. He said he did it to remind them of their place. I only know what he meant now."

"But your father made it flourish. Isn't that enough?"

He said: "No. No, that is not enough."

We were walking up to the rise which divided the farmland from the house. A few shacks squatted on the edge of a series of small fields. The labourers' compound looked like a small village, with paddocks and worn paths knotting the habitats. I noticed a splash of green spilling from a small dam on the far end of the settlement. On the other side, on our left, the farmhouse loomed through a few stunted trees.

"My heritage is a forgery, a lie," said Arno. "Look at this and tell me who really owns *Welbeloofden* now that the deed is... gone."

I could not reply so we walked back to the house in silence. My things were already packed. I loaded them into the car and shook hands with Arno.

"You can take your tape back to the TRC," he said, his lips slightly curved upwards but his eyes serious, "it doesn't matter to me any more."

As I drove out of *Welbeloofden*, I felt an overwhelming relief that my part in the history of the farm was done. As a consummation of this finality, as I pulled into the tarred stretch of highway which would take me back to the city, I opened the window, took the recorder out of the glove compartment, ejected the tape, and sent it spinning into khaki blur outside. Some two hundred meters from where it landed, I had to stop the car and breathe deeply to assuage a bout of nausea. My part in the history of *Welbeloofden* had, as a matter of fact, just begun. And so had this story.

There is nothing like a drive down a long country road from the person you used to be to induce a bout of nausea. But in the realm of non-fiction there is no room for signification because signification is the attachment or recognition of meaning and we act, when we're 'in' it, spontaneously. We can't control it, once we're 'in' it. But we can attach signification later as if our very understanding of the universe depended on it. Split seconds later or decades, we think back and try to understand. We even act according to how we want to have our actions to be interpreted, by ourselves and others.

This is why I'm the wrong person to be telling this story. I can't help it; I can't stand it. I must have signification, authorship, meaning.

I've got to tell you. I need to believe that you know.

Three weeks later, I drove back to *Welbeloofden* in my own jalopy and found Saul van Zyl firmly in control of the farm. He was sitting on the porch, smoking a pipe, with a pile of paw-paw skins on a newspaper next to his chair. He was watching Bartus Pietersen and another coloured man hoist a steel pipe onto a wind-pump in front of the house. He recognized me immediately. He had bits of paw-paw clinging to his mustache.

"Hello, Skimwitz," he said.

"Where are Arno and Anna?" I asked him.

"They've left."

"Why are you still here?"

He said: "Why are you here?"

"I've come to give the court's reply to your father," I lied.

"My father left with them," said Saul.

"Why did you stay, Saul?"

He pointed to the two men on the rig.

"They asked me to."

"I don't believe you."

"Ask them."

"Saul, it's your responsibility to leave them alone. Let them find their own freedom."

"Responsibility!" Saul stood up, knocking over the small pile of paw-paw skins. "Don't you talk to me about responsibility, boy. I don't want to be here. They want me here. I'm just here because I can't sell the fucking farm because my idiot brother burnt the bloody deed to the place. Now I need lawyers. You come in here and act like Jesus but you just don't know how things *work* around here. Half of them want to take their portions of the money and move to the city. With Arno gone, *Welbeloofden* is dead. Finished."

By this time, the two men had stopped working and walked over to us. They began to speak to Saul in rapid Afrikaans, occasionally breaking off to scowl at me. One lifted his hand and waved me off in the direction of my car.

As I drove out of *Welbeloofden* for the last time my eyes scanned the side of the road for the tape which I threw out. I don't know what I would have done if I had found it. One thing I do know: these words would not have been written if I did. You see, we're in it. All of us. We *are* it. We can't *control* it. *It* controls *us*. We create sculptures of gods and monsters and grovel before them to give it focus, stability. We seek to manifest the ineffability of the truth, fill its void morality, comprehend its infinite chaos and flux, give it the same ephemeral substance of which we ourselves are made. But it is not the gods and monsters which we must forget, neither should we undermine the signs and symbols or the language which we sanctify them with. What sent me away that last day on *Welbeloofden* weren't Saul's words, nor Bartus Pietersens' gesture, nor Willem Pietersen's scowl. What drove me back to Johannesburg was the fact that I had stared that very impulse to grovel at our own feet in the face, and lied about it. I refused to see it. I was complacent. I flicked the truth out of the window as though it would help me forget.

At the end of the day I got back into the car, my own old jalopy, and I drove away. I did what was expected of me.

Uncle Morgan still thinks that Franz van Zyl died minutes before the planned testimonial. Even though none of that even matters any more, even though it never did, here I am. I'm writing this. Soon, I think, I will stop. And you will be left alone with the knowledge. And we will both plop back into it like a comfortable, sticky jelly. We will continue to interpret these words out of our worlds and into their own, where they will resist oblivion according to only one criterion: the truth. So it is that I dispatch this final warning into the infinity and the void: I was the wrong person to be telling this story. The truth made me do it.

It was the truth.

Trilogy

[a compilation by Wanda Williams]

"Fuck all this lying look what I'm really trying to write about is writing
not all this stuff..."

- B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*.

University of Cape Town

ONE: damian

There is that in me - I do not know what it is but I know it is in me.

- Walt Whitman

University of Cape Town

12.04.2033 17h41

Comm Mode: 4

By the time I got home yesterday, I was just weak-kneed with rapture. I was fucken Enlightened, man, see. The bliss was so pure, the sublime pricklings of post-pinball adrenalization so fucken *deifying*, see, that I barely noticed the wierdoes' stares on the gate-ramp or the hoots of the Heaven pushers or the smell on the Inside. My head was still exploding with the echoes of that last crazy multiball, the quaking of the machine beneath me, its circuits wailing for more. I walked home flying, see. Everything was perfect.

Then I collapsed on the couch, too tired to blip the Q-lens or light a cigarette in the Tunnel chute. All I could do was relish this unbelievable greatness that was coursing through me, see, like a liquid Nirvana.

Let the pushers keep their pills. Heaven is scoring 6 760,500,000,000 on X-Men IV.

Heaven is being able to blast through the chaos of twelve shiny little steel balls racing haywire across the glassed-surface of a pinball machine, and punch three of those balls into different sockets on a boob-trapped, obstruction-infested board using six flippers, two pedal-pushouts, and a gronkk... simultaneously. See. That is Heaven. Not some pill.

I intend to spend a good three quarters of my monthly hash rations at the Velvet Egg in celebration. I intend to pass some Quicktime.

Death to the oppressed. Ha ha.

logoff

transcript terminated 17h50

You can always spot a Trog: they just launch the ball aimlessly around the machine, either too languid or too rigid in their flurries, slamming all four flipper buttons together at regular intervals - *bah, bah bah*. Trogs focus on the flippers during a multiball. They never catch the ball. They swipe their cards through the credit-slot continuously and change machines after every game. You can always spot a Trog: it invariably looks like a clumsy ham of a rip with them: you'd think, with their bulging eyes and perspiration, with their trembling and cursing, that they'd just slotted a double jackpot. You'd think they were doing really well unless you knew the game. If you knew the game you'd know that they are nothing but Cybernauts and VR-nuts who think that pinball's easy. See?

Pinball isn't easy. Pinball's for real. It's mind over matter; man vs. machine. It's our predilection for a dialectic duality, vented, manifest, see. In this world of virtual reality and cyberspace, it has become important to know not only the difference between computers and consciousness, but live it too. Most of the VR-nuts out there either begrudge the distinction or ignore it. I thrive on it. I fix pinball machines, and I play them. That's what I do. It's a strange, Frankensteinian relationship, but it's what I do. I suppose you could say, in terms of pinball, I know how things work. I understand things, see.

I mean, if pinball really is the anachronism which people like to believe it is then why do they always gather around the machine when someone - usually me - happens to be ripping the thing to shreds. There's noise and holo-effects, sure, but some of the Blipp-Ads in the street nowadays are noisier and more obstreperous. No. Look. Here it is. Here's the deal: they crowd around the machine not only to share in the glory but to feed their morbid... their taboo obsession with man conquering machine. See? There's some Jedi, see, and he's just going ballistic, see, off, and everyone notices this and instead of looking at the scoreboard or having the faintest idea of what he's trying to hit, they look at *him*. They look and they know that they are watching someone who is controlling a machine, and not even in cyberspace... in real life. He is the master. And they gather around to bask in his presence. They gather around to share in it. Parasites, see. And temporary disciples.

Look, I could get cheesy about the whole thing and try to explain the ins and outs of pinball to a Trog: the bewildering theories, the magical madresses, the fitful skills and the skillful fits, the rush of replay upon replay upon replay... But they wouldn't get it. Because they fail to distinguish between themselves and the machine. They are too afraid to, see. Too pusillanimous to assert the superiority of their consciousness over the machine. To them it would be... sacrilegious. Their reasoning goes: if this machine and I are battling over the control of these iron balls *which are already in its possession*, see, *already in its possession*... then I don't - *I shouldn't* - stand a chance. See? Ironically, it wouldn't be 'real' enough for them!

So the Jedis remain a minority, an elite, a misunderstood cognoscenti. And I would prefer it that way if it wasn't to the detriment of the game, see. Pinball has become marginalized, the Jedis branded as Luddites, the machines relegated to the seediest of arcades in the lowest levels of the city. There where it stinks. But know this: pinball is more than just an archaic electronic entertainment, see. Pinball

is a sport of the spirit, see, a necessary catharsis in this blur of somnambulance we call modern living. It's the closest that a 20-year-old semi-solipsistic atheist with a taste for blondes and Faulkner will get to brushing the cheek of God. I suppose its better than lions' dens and whale viscera and pretty damned sure it's more effective than prayer, for I know that divine jowl to be full of lights and points, and I know it to sprout Holos like wild wild dreams. It's an addiction, righteous and religious. See. A way of life.

Tonight's high score: 3,000,500,000,000. Beekouter. This is what I'm talking about.

logoff

transcript terminated 03h02

University of Cape Town

15.04.2033 22h12

Comm Mode: 4

It's weird. Each time I visit the old man, I leave thinking how old he is and how late I was born in his life. A strange foreign word he uses: [*.*] *laatlammietjie* [archive reference #SA44023]. I can't even pronounce it. He had to spell it out. It means 'late lamb'. His accent is harsh, Teutonic. African. It used to embarrass me until I discovered that it was in an African language. He was fifty when I was born, for Christ's imbecile sake! Maybe that's why I feel so comfortable around him now, see: because he is a stranger to me. He always was. Maybe that's why Gabriel hates him so much. He's in his thirties now. He grew up when the old man was a father.

My earliest memory is them arguing. Two angry sides of the same coin.

Weird.

logoff

transcript terminated 22h15

The old man enjoys my compulsory visits. I have learnt to stomach them. They pay the rent, after all.

Look, he's amusing to be around in full-rant. Like: his eyes shed their glaze for a sparkle, see, when he tells me he thought we'd be listening to music they played in the 1980's. He says it's the only thing that he thought would piss him off enough for him to object to as much as *his* parents objected to his particular taste when he was growing up. Not that he digs Flange-Hop much, which I put down to an underdeveloped sense of rhythm. The music's too complex, see, too intense for his aging ears.

He tells me today that he imagined me to turn out like those punks from *A Clockwork Orange*! I mean, what'd he think: we'd be bludgeoning his type to death and listening to unmixed, bassless Mozart?

In his day, pinball was a novelty. Primitive. But conceptually what a brick was to the city.

You should hear him on the Cybernet:

"Telephone," he grumbles. "What else d'ye need?"

"You're a Luddite," I tell him. But dig it: who in his day could have imagined the Cybernet or the Multinet or the Tunnels? Which came first, the Redlevels or the Tunnels? It's difficult to tell, sometimes. Back in the old man's day, *alleys* stank. Not as much, I'm sure, but with the same septic odour. See.

The city is a living thing, he says. The city reacts. And every time a Tunnel-chute gets clogged and there is an epidemic in the lower sectors, when the Redlevels assert their existence through disease, I believe him. If the Redlevels are the city's festering core, see, its tar-slick lungs, then the old man is right: the city just wants to die and melt into the Earth like everything else on it. The Tunnels are a method of artificial respiration. The city wants to die and we don't even give it that simple dignity. Every year, more sectors are pronounced Red. Every year, the seasonless, endodermic Redlevels creep higher and higher.

The sun doesn't even know that parts of this earth exist any more.

The Compound isn't such a bad place, though. For all his rhetoric, the old man gets to spend the rest of his days in a place that gets two full hours of reflected sunshine in summer. So for an old man whose novels did not make very much money, my father enjoys a life of relative luxury, sitting around, tinkering away at his laptop, playing chess. He knows it, see. He knows it.

Today he was in a good mood. He told me about New Year 2000. The millenium. I wish I could have been there to experience it: the chaos... the preceding hysteria... the expectation... glazed-eyed Christians singing hymns in the streets, waiting and waiting for Jesus... naked hippies... neo-Goths torching cars and raping cops... Where were your New Jerusalems, you deluded fuckers? Where your trumpets and angels, fools?

Things must have changed quickly after that. From cars and Hollywood and red meat to... to this. Christ al-bleeding-mighty. Christ a go-go. When you look at old people, you must remember one thing: they're the products of another time. Another, more innocent, dimension. See.

Things were different then. Things get increasingly fucked up. This must logically be a law of history. I look into the old man's face, at the warp of it, at the lines around those watery, gleaming eyes, and I can only deduce that things get increasingly fucked up.

Except pinball; pinball machines just keep getting better.

logoff

transcript terminated 01h16

University of Cape Town

18.04.2033 03h27

Comm Mode: 4

I stumbled upon an ancient machine today called Funhouse. Christ's wounded feet, it was a Williams model. In working order. There it was, see, standing right next to a polished Beekouter Five and to see the two machines together like that made me realize how far we've come. Beekouter Five projected its impressive holograms everywhere, see, belligerent in all its hi-tech, lazer studded, triple-clutch glory; Funhouse's chief attraction was a plastic head whose eyes moved.

"Fuck your soul!" roared Beekouter Five, "Fuck your soul!"

"Come on in..." squawked Funhouse.

I know that Nolton Bryggs designed Beekouter Two, see, upon which every other machine was to follow suit. Bryggs has become a legend for inventing the first extended flanks and dirty-dozen multiball in history.

If you ever hear this, Mr. Bryggs, sir, I just want you to know that you are a true pioneer of all that is important in life, an intrepid visionary, a god. May our paths cross one day even if it is only long enough for me to lick the skat-grease from your boots, you nobleman, you Yoda, you bringer of Good, sir.

Amen.

logoff

transcript terminated 03h33

18.04.2033 01h54

Comm Mode: 2

Text Archive #NY354/4/33

[*.*)

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

beached

i dream i am a whale

automatic logoff function

enabled 02h58

Last night Gabriel came home again. Jesus. Jesus' blisters. Every time he stumbles in here he looks more fucked up than the last. It's like he goes off to some macabre death-spa and comes back with more life sucked out of him. See, now I know that he knows that I know that he spends most of his time in the Redlevels where he can flood his brain with Super-H and Flux without being troubled by the cops, see. We don't talk about it, though, see. I don't give a damn and even if I did, see. He's been so far gone for so long now that it would be too late for either of us to make any difference. See.

Every time I visit the old man, he says, "Your brother?" and I say, "Don't know" and that's all that's said about him. Gabriel is the only topic of conversation that makes the old man my father. There's... there's an immediate awkwardness that settles over us at the mention of that name.

He strolls in here last night with four carts of Diaphnide, opened two, and started snorting them right there on the table. He offered me a line. I declined. But I did have some of his hash. It was Pakistani, and cut with some very good Flux. Very very good Flux. Look, I can handle the flutter of the Flux, but Diaphnide is another story. Anyway, I blocked up the smoke-detectors, cranked the Tunnel-chute, and a couple of puffs later I was rambling about pinball and resentment and leviathans and shit. I tell you the hash the government rations us is worse than the Military's Blipp-Ads. This black-market hash spins the limits, understand? Gabriel seemed not to notice. After a massive line of Diaphnide he sat straight up in the chair and didn't blink for about fifteen minutes. I got a bit bothered about him ignoring me so I mentioned the old man. But that just made him pick up his pen and start scribbling in that little book of his. Eventually I gave up and listened to some music. Lost myself in bass for a while. I remember writing something in the Log but I can't remember what.

In my mind, I have a fleeting image of Gabriel and the old man talking past each other when we all lived together, before they took the old man to the Compound and before Gabriel's exile. Although they did this often, things didn't seem so bad then, see. They wouldn't so much argue as bark fundamentally opposed dogma at each others deafening ears. Understand: the rift between Gabriel and the old man was more philosophical than anything else. I mean, the old man and I have our philosophical schisms, but they remain just that: a clean, cerebral bifurcation, see. But with the old man and Gabriel these pedantic philosophical frivolities take on another, more significant, dimension. Like I say: to him the old man was a father. To me they're just a pair of equally fucked up eccentrics, see.

This morning he was till there; tomorrow he'll be gone.

Tomorrow I'll tell the old man that Gabriel was at home for a while and he'll just nod, see, as always, as if the mere knowledge that my brother is still alive is enough, see. Maybe it's because Gabriel is a poet. For some reason, the old man always hated that so much. Sitting there, letting the wash of the hash and Flux cover me in an invisible film that allowed me to feel the music on my skin, watching Gabriel scribble frantically in his book, his eyes wide and watery, I began to understand why.

logoff

transcript terminated 21h39

23.04.2033 04h23

Comm Mode: 4

This is getting ridiculous. Gabriel hasn't spent so much time at home since as far back as I can remember and today, when I woke up, he was still on the couch, hash spliff in hand. He hadn't even bothered to choke the Tunnel-chute.

"You crazy?" I snapped. "Detector's not the only Cover that they can catch us with. Why don't you grind a bit and do it in the bashie, or is legitimacy not something you can cope with even when it suits you?"

He didn't even look at me. Blew smoke rings.

"Buchinsky's next door," I says.

"Shut up," he croaks. "I'm not feeling well."

"It's for my visits to see the old man that we've got this place."

Now, those last words were loaded to the teeth, see. I left not expecting him to be there when I got back, but when I opened the door, there he was, eyes bulging, sweat dripping off the end of his nose and onto that silly little notebook.

Gabriel. Jesus Christ died.

Gabriel the sickly, drugged, prodigal brother, and his poems.

logoff

transcript terminated 04h29

24.04.2033 23h45

Comm Mode: 4

Understand, please: pinball machines only become ripe after some period of use. You know, once the solenoids have been given a good rattle. But then they must be maintained at that level, see. You can't just let them slip off the edge, see. Pinball machines are high maintenance. A machine like Aztec or Beekouter Five needs to have its lazars adjusted almost weekly. Where aesthetics and necessity blur, you need a repair man. That's me, see. But when I see the machine open, its board and flanks tilted upward while another mechanic fiddles and adjusts, I can't bear to look. They are my own viscera, see, and I just can't bear to look.

[*.*)

Nothing sadder than a dying pinball machine; an old whore on the lower levels; a sleepless dreamer... relegation to the Redlevels, where things are black and sticky and forgotten...

[*.*)

"We have built Oblivion," says the old man, "out of plastic bricks and steel."

[*.*)

Gabriel's still around. He looks really fucked up. Ill, see. I mean, he's always been gaunt and coffin-dodging, but there's a fragility now to his few movements on that Christforsaken couch, a paleness to his pallor, that was never there before.

Not that I give a damn, see. Understand that. Not that I ever, for a second, thought I could.

logout

transcript terminated 23h51

25.04.2033 00h40

Comm Mode: 4

Buchinsky beats his wife. Just our luck to be next door to the fucken landlord. Christ's frowning features, the crepuscular ghoul kicks the shit out of the cursing, drunken hag about twice a month. It's become quite a routine lately, see: the screaming starts... the LevPol guys swagger up the corridor... he goes away with them for a while... she passes out, pissed... the next day he returns to find her mopping up the blood and vomit and whatever else wife-beating and alcoholism produce at their climax, and everyone in the first quad of Block 63, the blind guy, the Kaplans below, the ever-grinning Hare Krishnas in number 9, all of us here just sit around and await next week's gory scherzo...

Does anyone out there give a damn? Is anyone actually *listening* to this? I wonder if the Tunnels echo her shrieks?

Fuck this...

automatic logoff function

enabled 00h45

I have a fake I.D., see. Been smoking hash since I was eighteen. Okay? So what? When I told the old man about it he said that he had a fake I.D. too once. "What for?" I asked him. Alcohol, he says to me with a straight face. Look, I do know that marijuana was illegal in his day. Then again, he's fucken *African*, for Christ's melodious sake. The land of the raw goods. Those photographs of South African and Nigerian cannabis and hemp forests in *Global Geo* are awe-inspiring. Understand this, and don't doubt: one day, I'll get out of this place and emigrate to the land of my roots, buy an immuno-implant, work in a hash-manufacturing factory, import pinball machines. Live groundlevel, see. I'm not going to wither away in a fucken Compound like the old man, see, that much is for absolutely sure. You can buy groundspace in Africa for nearly nothing. I hear they practically throw the stuff away there.

Instead, in the meantime, today, yesterday, day before that, tomorrow, I spend my time jostling for a seat with a view at the Shtash Bar and guzzle the government's pitiful, impotent rations in what seems to be half a session. And what a depressing fucken dive to consider one of the prime hash bars in the city. Christ's pleas, a 'good seat' is a spot with a view into the abyss of the Levels, see. A huge Coke advertisement lights the depths of the city's bowels: a receding, hazy red. The place is full of crooning Groms and pathetic nymphettes pretending not to have a good time. If being out is as much of a drag as it is fashionable to purport, what the fuck are they all doing there in the first place? Understand?

This is why the government was allowing us these rations in the first place: so that we could overlook this mammoth fuck up and not care enough about living in it enough to question that circumstance, the Order, the plagues. Perhaps it would be better to go the route of Gabriel and melt into it, become it. Then hate it with as much passion as you hate yourself. Pump it full of Diaphnide and Supe, drown it in Flux. Quicken the rot.

Instead, I toke, stare into it, the city, its concrete yawn and cyber tooth, watch the sweep of the Holo-Ad's, the flicker of the Blipps, the criss-cross of the gate-ramps severed from the roar of this giant fucken stinking gullet by a thick, grimy pane of glass, and a viscid miasma of hash-smoke being sucked out of a specially-monitored Tunnel-chute that leads to the end of the colourless rainbow that is the Outside and beyond.

[*.*]

Why, I ask myself, I find myself asking myself, why do I comply with the restrictions? These days you can buy anything on the Black-Mart from Super-H to wives, see, and I've got a sibling who isn't only steeped but probably esteemed in those shady circles. See. So why should I give a damn about some government quota? What has the government ever done for me? Even the old man has a rebellious streak in him. Hates PC, detests authority. Calls it "mind control". And he might have a point, see. What better way to try to change the way we think than through language? Understand me - or should I say 'him': communication is the chink in our collective individuality; if they can get in there they can get between us in the most insidious way. He made me read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Boring old

shite. The old man rants about stuff like Faulkner and Martin Amis. But that stuffs so out-of-touch. So archaic. I do my share of reading, at the old man's guarded approval. "Misguided", he goes all accusing. 'Misguided' because I prefer modern authors like Finken, Wallaw, J.J. Bee - even Kapilevich - to his repertoire of obsolete colleagues.

Naturally, I've read a couple of the old man's books. *Undersigned*, *Pith*. These we never discuss, though, see. I mention them occasionally but my more intimate instigations are invariably ignored. Which is fine by me, see. It's a little game we play.

But today the game seemed more tedious than usual. Perhaps it's because I know that Gabriel's at home and for the second visit running I've replied to my father's ritual inquiry about him in some form of an affirmative. Understand?

On the way out of the Compound today, a nurse reminded me that I had another 'call-in' tomorrow. It's the old man's birthday. I was supposed to spend tomorrow swooning off somewhere on the Outskirts with Boots and Rondo, getting some fresh air, some sun, philandering with some Flux Rondo says will knock the socks off a level of Groms.

This happens every fucken year, for Christ's significant sake.

Look at the time.

Happy umpteenth, old man. Happy whatever the hell you are.

logoff

transcript terminated 00h29

So I suggested that Gabriel come with me to the Compound today, see. His response was so vitriolic, so profane, that I have resolved to never speak to that cagey fucker ever again. So I arrived at the Compound seething with more resentment towards both of these damaged individuals to which I am bound by more than I can either help or comprehend or render null than ever before, more than ever before. There they were, that familiar scene of drooling ancients and pathetic geriatrics playing chess and word games and so plugged into their Q-lenses that their heads lolled to focus on the non-existent peripheries of the holo-image. Drooling fools and senile wastes of space, the lot of them. I found the old man tapping away at his laptop. He didn't see me approach.

"It's your birthday," I says, but he doesn't stop punching the keys, doesn't even hear me. Then I wave my hand between him and the screen and he nearly chokes in shock. He looks up at me, gasping, his face contorted.

This is what I get for missing an excursion to the Outskirts. See. Such is the response to my symbolic presence there on this special day.

"That's why I'm here," I say. "It's your birthday."

"Oh," he says. Then he says: "Leave."

He went back to his writing and I let him. I couldn't leave, see, I knew the nurse would just send me back. So I sat opposite him, feeling absurdly hurt. He didn't want me there. But I did. I wanted to be there, see, listening to him try to subtly probe some vicarious experience of another life through me. And I through him. See. And I through him.

So I sat and watched for an hour while he rattled away at the keys.

"Why writing?" I asked him once, only once breaking the silence.

His features contorted. His eyebrows knit sometimes.

He says: "Don't know. Had to."

So many words out there. Libraries of volumes of pages, mega-giga-bytes of pages. What difference has he made?

'Don't know. Had to.' Had to write. Crazy old man. He wrote.

Today I saw the father in the old man and getting home to Gabriel sitting with his head in his hands, a skeleton, I began to understand why.

logoff

transcript terminated 22h20

29.04.2033 02h37

Comm Mode: 4

It's a matter of life and death. It's a matter of control. Beekouter Five. 2,000,800,000,000 points glow on the display. The machine is rumbling beneath you, sending vibrations all the way up your arms into your brain. BRBRBRBRBRBRBRBR.... EEKEEKEEEKEEK... *Whapp!!* The ball caught in the upper-second flipper of the right flank. Flash-Multiball lit and gawping just off center. Tricky trick shot. Extra spinball lit up the right ramp. The impossible choice is yours.

3,700,000,500,000. A miracle.

I am a god. Got that?

I am a god.

logoff

transcript terminated 02h38

University of Cape Town

02.05.2033 22h24

Comm Mode: 4

Understand: my father says that I'm "a creature of the night". What he hasn't grasped yet, see, is that it doesn't matter when you're awake nowadays. Everything runs always, see, always. If everyone had to do everything during a specified period of a day there would be chaos. Congestion, understand? It just so happens that I sacrifice the time when I could catch a few reflected rays in the Upper Levels for the quieter times of the city's existence. Facing the masses of Groms and Gadgets on their way to the stock market, their consciousnesses halved by the D-lenses attached to their faces. One foot in the cyber-realm from the moment they wake. What do they dream, I wonder? Do they half-think?

logoff

transcript terminated 22h27

University of Cape Town

03.05.2033 03h59

Comm Mode: 4

Gabriels dying and I'm drunk.

[*.*)

Jesus' shit.

[*.*)

Taking [...] vomit [...] you [...] dying

If you listen very carefully you can hear the [*.*)

There is nothing between [...] you and me.

IS ANYONE LISTENING TO THIS?

FUCKING [*.*)

FUCKING [*.*)

IS ANYONE...

system logoff function

override enabled 04h28

04.05.2033 01h09

Comm Mode: 4

I feel much better today. It was a good day today. I played pinball today.

I don't know what to tell the old man tomorrow. Maybe I'll say: "Gabriel's dead." And maybe he'll just nod.

logoff

transcript terminated 01h10

University of Cape Town

TWO: gabriel

It was the tomb of Galileo and the coat of arms could be the emblem of art itself, for the way of the artist is up a ladder of fire to the sky. Every true prophet of the spirit ascends towards heaven like Elijah.

- Hans Christien Andersen.

From **The Life And Death Of Ludwig Macbeth** (circa 2020)

Epilogue

Born with a splat, no doubt,
Born with a yawp.
Delivered into life's jaws:
A lamb.

First Love

I

So we fucked and thrust that knot of flesh to the ends of the universe
Because somewhere in the stars it was plotted, somewhere ordained
That it would be in the throes of each other
Our selves would become Ourselves,
Would become you and me
Never again:

Beyond that,
Afterwards,
A lesser life.

II

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Love's illusion | <i>...let me summon your soul through your skin with my breath</i> |
| Crucial to conception | <i>...suck the moans from your lips through my teeth</i> |
| The soul's demolition | <i>...lick the sweat from your eyes and drown in your hair</i> |
| No option | <i>...mold your cunt and your breasts and your thighs</i> |
| But Corruption. | |

III

It's such a painful coincidence
To be burnt by our limits
But you are there.

IV

If I were as strong as you I would end it sooner.
Instead that - that weakness - that you revile
Would have me sit and watch us bleed
These lies from each other like bitter milk,
Un-in-love

Brother

The clouded afternoon finds itself
Still and windless, but on your shelf
These books of pages warped and bent
From memories of ceaseless heat
And endless days of rain
Flutter

Evenings of lies and sedation
We cling like children
To measures of salvation
And, trembling, prick our fingers
On the sanctified edge
Of a sacrificial dagger

Poise it straight for the heart
For the thin pulse of the dawn
Though heralded by birds
Can only be grasped
And only then asked
To be the dying
By the dying.

From **Requiem** (circa 2032)

.....

"This for their desperate, unfathomable assumptions,"

Keeps me conscious somehow

As the first is driven

(though with a muted thud)

Crisply cleaving

Flesh and wood.

As if these are the first droplets of sacred blood

To soak into the undisturbed dust of their minds

The pious and devout

Flinch.

I am your proof, wretches, that angels can breathe;

Tell me, are your demons as cruel as mine?

"This for their lusty grasp of destruction."

Ah,

Again flesh succumbs to pain's hot seduction.

Nail two screams its way into me

Usurps its brother's relevance

In my seeping, weeping, re-reaped life.

Through my blackened rapture:

their indulgent strife!

I purge and fuck to forget and be forgotten.

I cease to breathe to never see you again.

"This for their tortuous, expedient lives,

This for their limits, their winglessness,

Their knives."

Third and final thrust through,

I am hoisted above

My cultivated masses.

*I'll make you repent for my birth, let you burn for my pain
Bend your minds with this fate, have all heretics slain*

These arms, pinned to embrace,
Occupy my simple symbol
Whose origin - pain - forebodes us always
By whispering philosophies of fear...

.....

Father,
Who governs the realm I'm lost in,
Tossed by this providence and predestination,
Devoured by my own transubstantiation,
Not once NOT ONCE
Have I basked in your pity.

Father,
These spells you cast but cannot teach
Have compelled all this time me to preach
To unknown people of little-known things
And it is slowly killing me.

.....

THREE: samuel

...tell me, Muse, of the story teller who was thrust to the edge of the world, childlike, ancient, and through him reveal Everyman...

...with time my listeners became my readers. They no longer sit in a circle. Instead they sit far apart and one knows nothing about the other. I am an old man with a brittle voice but the tale still rises from deep down and the slightly open mouth repeats as powerfully as it is effortless. A liturgy for which no one need be initiated to the meanings of the words and phrases to understand. The world seems to be sinking into dusk...

- Wings of Desire

from the journal of Samuel Williams:

"The Cape Town winter is here. This may our first in this place, but one of the first things that Kim and I noticed about the locals was their somber trepidation of the mid-year rainy season. So consistently eminent was this reaction to any mention or indication of the end of autumn that I now feel somehow that I know it as intimately and fearfully as they do. The clouds that gather overhead, crowding the ubiquitous mountains, grow darker, more insistent each day. Virtually anyone I speak to nowadays frowns up at the sky and moans, "Mm-hm. Oh, ja..." before muttering some or other invective at the prospect of an inevitable, incessant deluge. There is a bracing in the air. But for someone who has been choking on the dry highveld winters, where the air becomes so thin, dry and sharp that it cracks the back of the throat, a rainy season seems sweet salvation. And for Kim and I both, the move has been a resurrection, a new beginning. Each moment throbs with potential for the most primal force we harbour, not only as human beings, but animals, and not only animals, but expressions of life: contentment. Nirvana. And when I look at her strolling pregnant on the infinite whiteness of the beach, when I feel the baby kicking between us, when I walk Micro in the forests after work and the ground is so fecund that the air smells intoxicating enough to be genital, I feel that I am plugging into the very drift of the cosmos. At one. Replete. Let the rainy season come. I have a fireplace to celebrate my wet incarceration with. "

- 22 May 2001

"Casper phoned twice today, demanding to know whether I'd be finished the Truman story by deadline. I use the excuse of lecturing to leave my beeper on all day, which is partly true. But most of all my mind is plagued by the novel. I just want to finish it and never think about it or another ever again. It drains my very life-source instead of giving me the fulfillment that the weaving of a tale used to. I began the novel to balance the prostitution of academia and occasional journalism, but find that it has tipped the scales to the point of a pathological fascination. Only Kim and Gabriel hold me from the edge of the abyss that would be an obsession. I am, perhaps, an obsessive man, but know that the only true priority can be love. Every day, I am shown a simple perfection, but am torn away by some incessant, hollow necessity that curdles my thoughts unless it is addressed. My wife realizes this, and allows me to spend these hours cocooned from that love, immersed in the Lie, with no resentment at all. I have never told her how difficult it is for me to seclude myself like this. Because I have to build a shell. Because there is an ineffable sacrifice that takes place between us as this seclusion has gradually become ritualistic. And because she represents the flip-side to every obsession that could ever lead me astray. It is a vital thing to me, her love, and consecrated by Life itself. It keeps me poised above reality on the cloud of a juvenile, ecstatic optimism that she provides. Love, reality, and fiction; the trinity of my life expressed through the irony of their separation in it. I wonder, are all of our lives a myriad of unexpressed, lost thoughts? Is this what I fear so much? Silence? The uncomfortable silence of a mind

not in love. I have never thought of myself as ambitious, only obsessive. For the fine line, my criterion, is love.”

- 9 March 2003

“This afternoon, the same argument again. The same rhetoric, metaphors, hurtful loops of accusation. She insists, blindly and vehemently, on keeping the child. I can see that our stubborn and vociferous indignation disturbs Gabriel. I do not need the prissy whines of a mathematics teacher at a PTA meeting to tell me that the recent pressure in the household has been taking its inevitable toll. I will be damned if this over-emotional issue, this sore spot, can not be resolved in the most rational and beneficial manner possible. The doctors have left a tantalizing fifty percent chance of a successful term of pregnancy. I find myself feeling resentful of their clinical heartlessness. It puts everything I am at risk. If they would have done their job properly the first time, we would not be in this insufferable dilemma.”

- 11 January 2014

“I can no longer deny the effect of Kim’s death on Gabriel. The look in Donna’s eyes when she arrived to nurse the baby said it all. Behind her tireless support lies the fact that I am an ineffectual parent, and a failed spouse. I have allowed my first son and wife to slip through my fingers. It nauseated me to discover that *Pith* is being deconstructed by a psychologist in New Zealand as being ‘paradigmatic with regard to family dynamics’. Despite his good intentions, when Peter mentioned it at the staff meeting I felt a bubble of disgust appear in my stomach that kept rising up to my throat despite my platitudinous response and the undeterred continuation of the proceedings. But by the end of the meeting, I was dizzy with grief. This time their looks of concern, their slaving for my hitherto pent suffering, was undisguised. Peter’s brow furrowed and Danielle’s eyes narrowed at my apparent anxiety. This is the moment they have all been waiting for: the collapse of the veneer I have so carefully constructed; the breaking of the shell; I emerge dry and decrepit and hungry for nothing.

Gabriel seems unfazed by the attention that Damien is getting from his beloved aunt. He has been spending unnaturally long periods of time in his room. When I broach the subject, his reply is either “Reading” or Nothing”. A personal message to me, I fear, some indication of where I have gone wrong. Yet I feel the urge to do the same, spend my time locked away in my study, lying, building parallel tracks through this wilderness of pain. I wish to analyze myself into an easy oblivion, into a place where Kim and I are still a hermetic unit, walking through the forests in comfortable silence, laughing at a joke forgotten for years and now rejuvenated a thousandfold by her spontaneous mirth, where Gabriel has continued to show me his poems and read aloud and Damien is showered with the same love that his brother came into this world swathed in. It is only now that I realize how small my part was in that love, how much I took and how little I gave. I know that Gabriel does not blame Damien for his mother’s death. But, God help me, sometimes I do.”

- 23 October 2015

"Tomorrow, we leave for America. Our fate is sealed. I have secured a post which, though technically could be considered a demotion, promises benefits that range from special care for Damien to a new beginning for Gabriel. For the first time since Kim's death, Gabriel and I have found a common interest in this restless desire to move on. I am greatly relieved, for his sake as well as my own, as well as for the sake of our relationship which, admittedly, yet despite my most desperate efforts to the contrary, has become a vicious battle. However hard I try, I can not reach out to him, and he will not let me touch him any other way. He will not come to me; it is too late for that.

I can not live here any longer, and it is as simple and ruthless as that. Cape Town once bloomed with her; now every corner and patch of grass, every mountain spire, each footpath, reminds me of her, turning, hair flown halo-round, eyes wide, turning, a hand on her head to steady the wide-brimmed straw hat that she bought once in Hout Bay because I joked that they looked like sombreros. Each moment in this place, every glance from the corner of my eye, day and night, is her turning and turning to face me. We must leave."

- 5 August 2018

"Out of this Babylon, he comes to me. "Your son," says the nurse, and he enters wearing the same look of determined bonhomie. I have nothing to say, sometimes, and he has little to tell me. I speak of whatever I am writing at the time, which he probably takes to be the fantastic ruminations of an old man in a glass cage. I search his face for signs of pity, but find none. He looks at me askance while I speak. There is only the patronizing impatience of youth when faced with the presence of the past, a strange and distant past. I am not a part of his personal history. I suspect that during the week he cavorts around the urban hash bars and participates in whatever these kids are brainwashing themselves with nowadays. Thus, we live through each other. I am too old to be a father to him, just as I was too feeble to be Gabriel's. I sit here in my glass cage, on a fake lawn, in a reflection of the day, and ponder how quickly things change in the face of stubborn and unmoving human nature. I know, now, what destroyed Gabriel: words. And it was I who let them, I who insinuated them as such a deadly force. We have drowned in them, and each other through them. Gabriel said to me once: "You will never understand." Yet I understand so much that it moves me beyond the pain of loss. I am an aggressor, not a victim. I wield these words just as much as he does. More, perhaps. I have set a fatal example. Damien still comes to me, though, and shows none of the precocious madness that have stolen his brother's soul. He enjoys reading, loves words, but not enough. And I will never let it be enough. I wish to be a stranger to him. I don't want the boy caught up in the insanity that claimed his family. I am burning in hell for my sins, already. This retirement compound is my purgatory. It is long enough."

- 3 April 2032

"...so i outlive my firstborn. he goes with his rapture. and i know now, irrefutably, that i, samuel williams, have his sweet blood on my hands. strange, only now, after all these years, i can feel my fingers stopping. it is a good sensation, this numbness. I have done enough. enough has been done now. no salvation..."

- 11 May 2033

“...the soul of a writer is forged in the place where words meet death, where signs point upwards and forever, where they launch us into the infinite... now i know that but too late... i am nearly in this place... i can not feel myself breathe, my fingers are stiff, they fumble... i will remember gabriel who spent his life in this place and pray that damien never sees it...”

- 12 May 2033

University of Cape Town

FOUR: trilogy

...I give all this background information because I do not think that one can access a writer's motives without knowing something of his earlier development. His subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in - at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own - but before he begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he can never escape... [if] he escapes from his earlier influences altogether, he will have killed his impulse to write.

- George Orwell

“My father and my brother died two days apart. I inherited my father’s journals and my brother’s poems. I dedicate this book to them both. I am sorry, father, but the place was so beautiful, so innocuous, that I decided to stay.”

- dedication of *Trilogy* by Damien Williams, 2048.

University of Cape Town

APPENDIX: *Poems*

Hare Hare Haiku

Chant to clear clear head
Ascetic meanderings
O'er unrolling hills.

Come To Blur

For Fendal

It's such a small town.
I can see your light from here
Crossing the space between us.

And though it's a distance
Vast enough
To shift time, warp gravities
To send us into orbits
Around which moons
Make dangerously close passes
To block out the sun,

Like galaxies we burn
Beautiful signals to each other:
I am here
I am here

But you are there.

Element

Said the stoned surfer to the mountain:
"Hey, like, wow, hey?"
And the mountain replied
It was a wave
Like he
Only like he
Of a different kind.
Never breaking.

Convalescence?

Took my heart in my hands today
Put all her letters in the same place
To bury that part of me
Thought dead, felt numb.
I can still hear them beating.

Ferguson For President

Let poets rule us
We'd be sipping toadstool tea
Laughing merrily

(Pun)ctuation

All poets are rebels and idealists.
Their metier's
Not for those
Who skip too quickly
To the following(-)
Line.

Egoism

I was writing this poem once
(exposing my soul like an organ
baring, paring, daring to eke
the blood of a root
to the germs of the
words of this world)
When its subject phoned
All sultry and seductive-like
All pout-mouthed 'n pre-worded 'n
All fucks and you-don't-love-me-enoughs.
I wrote it anyway.

Angst

Angst, the Dada deity of doubt,
Shat twins:
Derrida & Descartes
Skeptics, both,
And French.

"I think therefore I am."
What is?
Is thought?
Thought what?

And unlike passive pictures -
Stupid signs -
Language is an act
Like a man with a gun
To your head in your head
Calling the shots.

Between Us

If you hold one thing against me
Hold it between us
And pray that nothing can cleave it
And hope to some day know
That there can be nothing between us
That hope cannot overthrow.

Essence

1

Sartre speaks of infinity
But fails to see
The transcendental as emotion
Which seeks to bind in blind devotion
And instead somehow sets us free
Tears down our walls
Casts us like fate-seeking variables
Through the womb
Like soft fire between cool sheets
Of accelerated flesh.

2

Consciousness of consciousness
Of absolute
Unabstraction
Is not enough
To know feeling
Without distraction.

Dunes

Four-foot glass-wall sky
Silence save the slice of skeg
And the inside-beat

Ode to (a) Penguin

Having been weaned on thee
These orange-spined vertebrae
Beckon like a crossing-line;
And dreams of last-gasp endings
That keep me up at night
Keep me up at night.

Jealousy

You don't
It's not that
I wasn't
He.
It's him.
It's me.
It's we
Three.

Mauvaise Foi

I dreamt I was at a rave
And you were there at the bar
And you were on the dance floor
Making me come for you through the throng;

But she was outside, in the field, counting flowers,
Putting petals on my lips from her bowers.

An Atheist's Prayer

"Grace: a condition in which truth
can be told clearly, without blindness."
- J.M.C.

Good god,
Give me strength in wisdom
To clarify the obscure.

Oh lord,
Don't ever let me be a pedant.

But it seems so simple to me,
This spirituality,
A matter of mild deconstruction.

We all mean the same thing when we say
"Good god" -
We mean that which we can feel.

That which we can feel.

Hysperia

Muslim call to prayer, afraid
Mosquito drone lights orange sky
Purple.

Poem for Jeanette Winterson

You are twice a woman: therefore too lyrical.
I'm all cock, all plot; you weave deeply
Plunging through depths so quickly discovered
Uneasily reached
But which coax me to linger
Lest they remain unexplored.

I am an ape who pokes sticks into these holes,
You seep through them, know their codes.

The measure of love is loss
Because its true end can only be death.